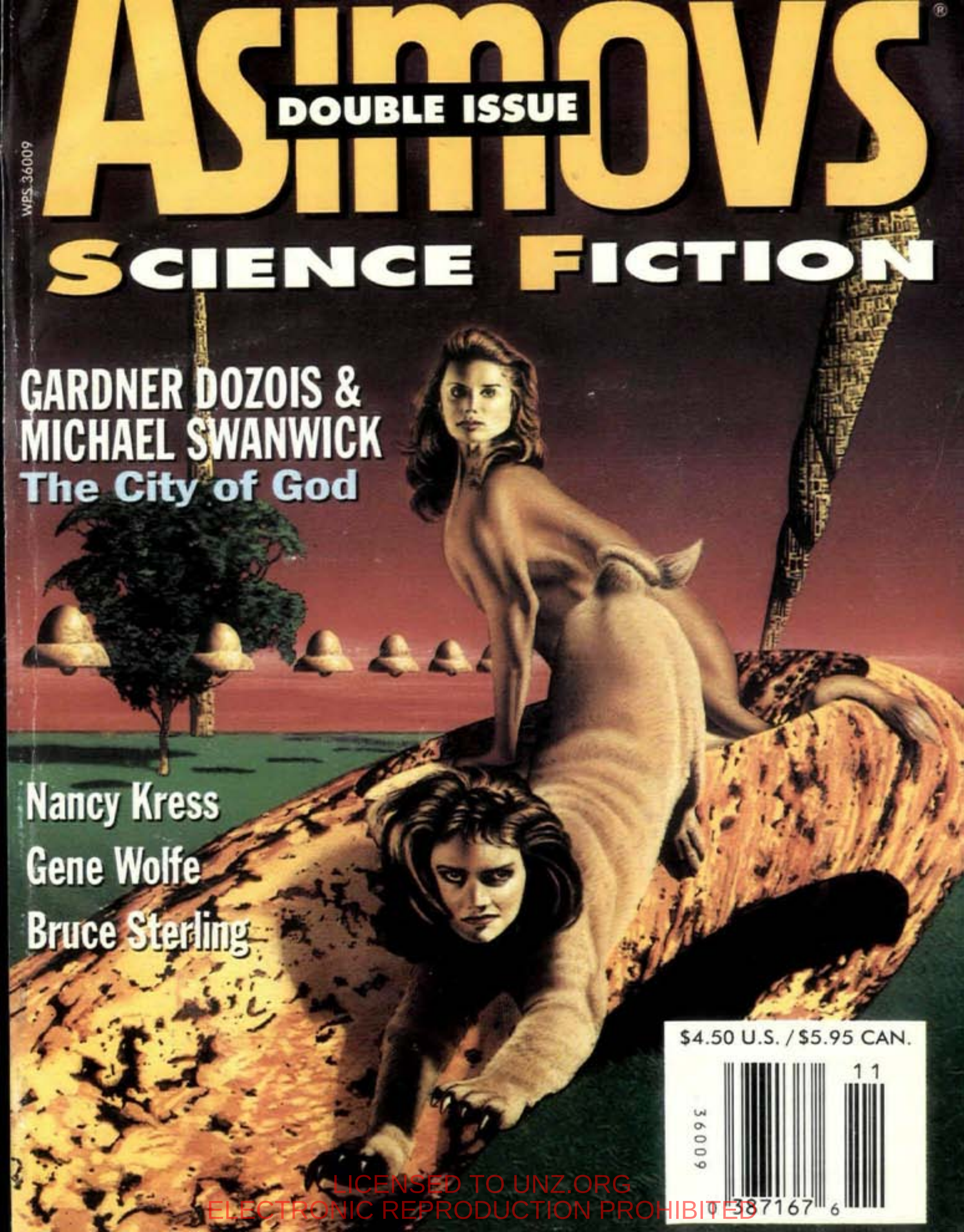
WPS 36009

ASIMOVS®

DOUBLE ISSUE

SCIENCE FICTION



GARDNER DOZOIS & MICHAEL SWANWICK
The City of God

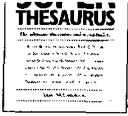
Nancy Kress
Gene Wolfe
Bruce Sterling

$4.50 U.S. / $5.95 CAN.
11
36009
0 387167 6

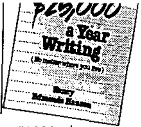
& Style
How to develop your own voice as a writer, hone your personal writing style, and create powerful character voices in your fiction.
Johnny Payne

#10452 $15.99

#10336 $19.95



#10424 $22.99

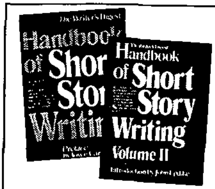

a Year Writing

#10328 $18.95

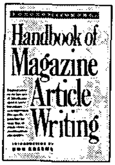
BLOCK BUSTER NOVEL
ALBERT ZUCKERMAN

#10393 $18.99

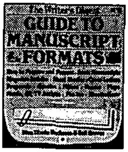
#48000 $17.99


The Writer's Digest
Handbook of Short Story Writing
Handbook of Short Story Writing
Volume II

Dual: #43057
$25.98
Count as
1 selection.


Handbook of Magazine Article Writing

#10075 $18.99


The Writer's Digest
GUIDE TO MANUSCRIPT FORMATS

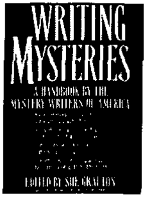
#10025 $19.99

HOW TO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

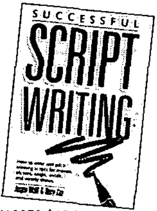
#10181 $14.99

DARE TO BE A GREAT WRITER
329 KEYS TO POWERFUL FICTION

#10325 $15.99 pb


WRITING MYSTERIES
A HANDBOOK BY THE MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA
EDITED BY SUE GRAFTON

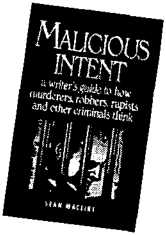
#10286 $18.99


SUCCESSFUL
SCRIPT WRITING

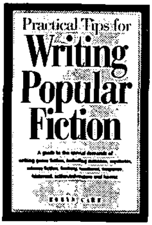
#10072 $18.99

WRITER'S DIGEST SOURCEBOOK
Building Believable Characters

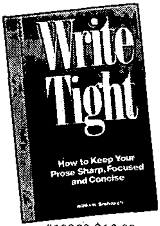
#10463 $17.99


MALICIOUS INTENT
a writer's guide to how murderers, robbers, rapists and other criminals think
SEAN MACTIRE

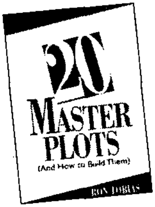
#10413 $16.99 pb


Practical Tips for Writing Popular Fiction
ROBYN CARR

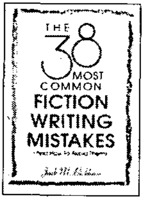
#10313 $17.95


Write Tight
How to Keep Your Prose Sharp, Focused and Concise

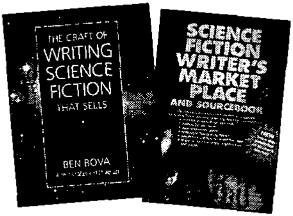
#10360 $16.99


20 MASTER PLOTS
(And How to Build Them)
RON TOBIAS

#10366 $17.99


THE 38 MOST COMMON FICTION WRITING MISTAKES

#10284 $12.99


THE CRAFT OF WRITING SCIENCE FICTION THAT SELLS
BEN BOVA
SCIENCE FICTION WRITER'S MARKET PLACE AND SOURCEBOOK

Dual: #43115 $36.94 Count as 1 selection.

AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

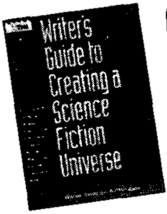
- Discounts from 15-65% on every book you buy!
- FREE Bonus Books!
- FREE postage & handling on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- Satisfaction Guaranteed 100%!

HOW THE CLUB WORKS

You'll receive the *BULLETIN* every four weeks, about 14 times a year, featuring a Main Selection and 100 or more of the newest and best writing instruction books. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing, and it will be sent automatically. If you want a different book, or want nothing that month, you'll always have at least 10 days to decide and notify the Club by returning your Selection Card. If late delivery of the *BULLETIN* should ever cause you to receive a book you don't want, you may return it at club expense. As a new member you agree to purchase one book from the *BULLETIN* within the next six months; after that, you may cancel your membership at any time. Each time you buy a book, your membership will be renewed for six months from the purchase date.

TAKE 2 BOOKS FREE

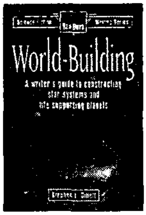
WITH 1 FOR JUST $9.95 WHEN YOU JOIN WRITER'S DIGEST BOOK CLUB!


Writer's Guide to Creating a Science Fiction Universe

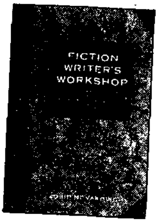
#10349 $18.95

How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction

#10245 $14.99 pb


World-Building
A writer's guide to constructing star systems and life-supporting planets

#10470 $17.99


FICTION WRITER'S WORKSHOP

#48003 $17.99

#10469 $17.99

MEMBERSHIP SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

☐ **YES!** I want to join Writer's Digest Book Club. Please sign me up and send me:

My first FREE book #______________ .... **FREE**
and my second FREE book #______________ .... **FREE**
with my third book #______________ for only .... $ 9.95
plus postage and handling .... $ 5.61
all for just .... $ 15.56

(Payment must accompany order. Ohio residents add 55¢ tax; Canadians add $1.09 GST.)

☐ Check enclosed or Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct # ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ Exp. Date: __________

I have read the membership plan and agree to buy 1 more book in the next 6 months.

Signature______________________________
required on all certificates

Name______________________________

Address______________________________

City______________________ State______ ZIP______________

Writer's Digest BOOK CLUB

Offer good for new members in U.S. and Canada only. U.S. funds only. Allow 3-4 weeks for delivery. All applications subject to approval.

P.O. Box 12948 Cincinnati, Ohio 45212-0948

AS25

10

50

Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 20 Nos. 10 & 11 (Whole Numbers 250 & 251)
October/November 1996

Next Issue on Sale
October 15, 1996

NOVELLAS

72 Swimmers Beneath the Skin — Ian R. MacLeod
208 The City of God — Gardner Dozois & Michael Swanwick

NOVELETTES

10 The Flowers of Aulit Prison — Nancy Kress
50 Try and Kill It — Gene Wolfe
106 The Wind Over the World — Steven Utley
136 Generation Zero — Michael Cassutt
156 Bicycle Repairman — Bruce Sterling
186 Flying Lessons — Kelly Link

POETRY

49 This Neat Sheet — James Tiptree, Jr.
71 Basic Criteria — W. Gregory Stewart
134 Day Omega — W. Gregory Stewart
155 Anguish — David Lunde

136

186

DEPARTMENTS

4 Reflections: The Realm of Prester John ________ Robert Silverberg
275 On Books ________ Paul Di Filippo
288 The SF Conventional Calendar ________ Erwin S. Strauss

Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-four Hugos and twenty-two Nebula Awards, and our editors have received ten Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1995 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Cover design by Terri Czeczko
Cover illustration by Bob Eggleton

Gardner Dozois: Editor
Sheila Williams: Executive Editor
Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director 1977-1992
Peter Kanter: Publisher
Terri Czeczko: Art Director

Published monthly except for a combined October/November double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription $33.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $43.45 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction,* 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications.

© 1996 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited.

All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction,* Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

Printed in U.S.A.

REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE REALM OF PRESTER JOHN

This month's essay can be construed either as a public service announcement or as crass self-promotion. More likely it's a bit of both, but so be it. Modesty and reticence were not the most widely acclaimed virtues of my late beloved predecessor in this editorial space, the esteemed Dr. Asimov, and perhaps I'll be providing a welcome touch of Isaac-nostalgia for you if I blow my own horn a little here.

Anyway:

My book *The Realm of Prester John* is being reissued by the Ohio University Press, after having been unavailable for the past twenty-odd years. Ohio U. is doing it in a hardcover edition and also as a trade paperback. This is good news for Silverberg collectors and for fantasy writers who would like to do a little fundamental research into medieval esoterica that might just lead them toward some valuable material for their next trilogy. It is also, of course, good news for me, because *The Realm of Prester John* is a book of which I'm inordinately proud and its status as a highly-sought-after-and-virtually-impossible-to-find collector's item was not the status I would have preferred for it to attain when I wrote it with so much travail long ago.

It isn't a novel. It's non-fiction: a scholarly work, if you will. I wrote it in 1970, when I still had some delusions of scholarship, and it was published two years later in an extremely handsome edition by Doubleday, complete with two-tone endpaper maps and many quaint and curious illustrations, and it went out of print with astonishing swiftness. Since then, hardly a year goes by without my getting inquiries about where copies may be obtained. Well, now you know. Your neighborhood science fiction bookstore will be able to order one for you, or, for all I know, may have a couple in stock; or else you can query the Ohio University Press yourself—the address is Scott Quadrangle, Athens, Ohio 45701.

And just who was Prester John, and why should any lover of science fiction or fantasy care to know anything about him?

He's a fascinating mythical figure, is who. And the story behind the myth is an even more fascinating adventure in romantic medieval geography.

The Prester John legend first surfaced in Europe late in the twelfth century. A widely circulated and much discussed letter from him had appeared—no one knows its source—in which a mighty king of India who styled himself "Prester John," John the Priest, sent his best wishes to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Comnenus.

"If indeed you wish to know wherein consists our great power," this great Indian monarch said, "then believe without doubting that I, Prester John, who reign supreme, exceed in riches, virtue, and power all creatures who dwell under heaven. Seventy-two kings pay tribute to me. I am a devout Christian and everywhere protect the Christians of our empire, nourishing them with alms. We have made a vow to visit the sepulcher of our Lord with a great army, as befits the glory of our Majesty, to wage war against and chastise the enemies of the cross of Christ, and to exalt his sacred name."

Prester John's letter declared that his magnificence dominated the world from the "Three Indias" onward as far as "the valley of deserted Babylon close by the Tower of Babel." It spoke of the elephants, dromedaries, and camels of his territories. It told of such miracles in his kingdom as a sandy sea without water that abounded with fish, and a waterless river of stones, and a place where all ailments could be cured. "Honey flows in our land, and milk everywhere abounds. . . . In it are found emeralds, sapphires, carbuncles, topazes, chrysolites, onyxes, beryls, sardonyxes, and many other precious stones. . . ."

The puissant potentate asserted that he was served at his table by no less than seven kings, sixty-two

GARDNER DOZOIS:
Editor

SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Executive Editor

SCOTT L. TOWNER:
Senior Associate Editor

SHARAH THOMAS:
Editorial Assistant

TERRI CZECZKO:
Art Director

ANTHONY BARI:
Junior Designer

CAROLE DIXON:
Production Manager

CYNTHIA MANSON:
VP, Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

GEORGE SCHUMACHER:
Manager, Contracts and Permissions

KATHLEEN HALLIGAN:
Subsidiary Rights and Marketing Coordinator

JOE GALLAGHER:
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE:
Circulation Services

JUDY DORMAN:
Advertising Sales Manager

FRAN DANON:
Editorial Director

ISAAC ASIMOV:
Editorial Director
(1977-1992)

PETER KANTER:
Publisher

ADVERTISING OFFICES NEW YORK
(212) 698-1313

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
Dresner Direct, Inc. N.Y., N.Y. (212) 889-1078

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

dukes, three hundred and sixty-five counts. Twelve archbishops dined daily on his right hand, and twenty bishops on his left. "If you can count the stars of the sky and the sands of the sea, you will be able to judge thereby the vastness of our realm and our power." And when he rode forth to war, said Prester John, his troops were "preceded by thirteen huge and lofty crosses made of gold and ornamented with precious stones, instead of banners, and each of these is followed by ten thousand mounted soldiers and one hundred thousand infantrymen. . . ."

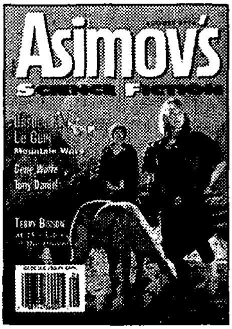
Pretty impressive—especially to a Europe troubled by the power of the hostile Moslems to the east. A Christian king of immense might, ready to ride out of India and finish the job begun by the first Crusaders in 1095, of driving the Saracens from the Holy Land? All Europe was agog. The Christian hold on the Near East was precarious in the extreme, and dangerous new leaders had arisen among the Turks and the Arabs. It was not hard to imagine a Moslem resurgence that not only would sweep the Crusaders into the sea but would see the armies of Mohammed marching onward into Europe itself. To have a mighty Christian ally like Prester John emerge on the far side of the Moslem empire was joyous news indeed.

Of course, the legions of Prester John never did materialize; and in time the Crusaders lost their grip on the Holy Land and even mighty Byzantium fell eventually to the Turkish Sultan. But the grip of fantasy on the human mind is eternally powerful. All through the Middle Ages, hope continued to glimmer that one day Prester John and his troops would ride out of the east and set all things to rights.

Who, though, was Prester John, and where, exactly, was his kingdom?

Well, nowhere, exactly, since his letter was in all probability the clever fabrication of some imaginative European monk, who very likely was familiar with that magnificent ninth or tenth century collection of fables that we call *The Thousand and One Nights* and who seems to have borrowed liberally from such tales as that of Sindbad the Sailor. But no one knew that then; and so, for hundreds of years, the legend of Prester John remained ever bright. Perhaps he lived in India, perhaps he lived in the almost unknown wastelands that we now call Mongolia, perhaps he lived somewhere else entirely. But that he lived *somewhere* and would eventually come to save the Christian world from the menace of the Turks (or, later, the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan) was an idea that nobody challenged.

And so the quest for the realm of Prester John became one of the great romantic enterprises of the Middle Ages, a geographical adventure akin to the search for El Dorado, for King Solomon's Mines, for the Fountain of Youth, for the Holy Grail, for the Seven Cities of Cibola, for the Amazons' land, for



A Gift They'll Enjoy All Year!

Share the excitement of new worlds when you give a gift subscription to **Asimov's Science Fiction!**

We'll send 12 issues filled with imaginative stories from the best science fiction writers of today for just $27.97. **You save more than 20%!**

To charge your order by phone, call toll-free:
1-800-333-4108
Mail to: Asimov's, P.O. Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593

☐ Payment enclosed ☐ Bill me

Send to:
Name ______
Address ______
City ______
State ______ Zip ______

From:
Name ______
Address ______
City ______
State ______ Zip ______

Use a separate sheet of paper for additional gift subscriptions. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. We publish a double issue in October/November which counts as two issues toward your subscription. Outside USA: Add $5 per year for shipping and handling. (US funds only, payable with order.) To charge your order by phone call 515-247-7571.
HA679

the lost city of Atlantis. Men would look throughout the whole length of Asia for his glittering kingdom, and then, not finding anything that corresponded to the legends of magnificence they had so often heard about, they would search for the land of Prester John in Africa; and ultimately they would persuade themselves that they had actually found it there, in Ethiopia, where an authentically Christian monarch did indeed reign in something that might be called great splendor.

At least two writers of adventure fiction have dealt—in rather oblique ways—with the Prester John saga. One was the British novelist John Buchan, best known for the suspense novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps,* source of Alfred Hitchcock's celebrated movie. Buchan's novel *Prester John,* first published in 1910, was once almost as famous. It does not, however, grapple very directly with the legend. Buchan picks up the story at its very end—the discovery by sixteenth-century Portuguese explorers of a Christian kingdom in Ethiopia—and suggests that the memory of that kingdom's grandeur had inspired the Zulus of early twentieth-century South Africa to establish a cult of black liberation aimed at overthrowing the rule of the white settlers. What follows is a lively novel somewhat in the vein of H. Rider Haggard, with no elements of the fantastic whatever and, despite its title, no significant connection to the Prester John mythos.

Closer to the mark—but skewed by its author's attempt to make the legend his own—is the pair of Prester John novellas by Norvell W. Page published in 1939 in John W. Campbell's famous fantasy magazine *Unknown*. In these—"Flame Winds" and "Sons of the Bear-God"—Page showed that he was familiar with the original tales, but depicted his Prester John as an invincible first-century Roman gladiator whose sword-wielding adventures throughout the Orient had inspired the later stories of a great Christian king in Asia. An interesting twist, but once again of only the most tangential relevance.

I became fascinated with the story in the mid-1960s, chased it to its various sources, and in time produced what is, in fact, the basic text about the myth's many permutations over a seven-century period. Anything anyone might ever have thought about Prester John is there; and quite a story it is, if I do say so myself, and I guess I do.

I dipped into my own book once when writing a fantasy novel called *To the Land of the Living,* which is mainly about the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh but in which Prester John makes an appearance. (The Prester John part of the story appeared in this magazine under the title of "Gilgamesh in the Outback" and won me a Hugo in 1987.) But surely there's meat enough in the Prester John saga to supply some fantasy writer with sufficient material for a trilogy and a half, at the very least. Heck, it's a trilogy I might even want to write myself, once I get finished with projects already on hand, if no one else gets to it first.

At any rate, the legend of Prester John is a wondrous story of human inventiveness and gullibility. I had a grand time writing about it a quarter of a century ago. And now, thanks to Ohio University Press, the book is a collector's item no longer, but is readily available to you all. I just thought you might want to know. ●

ARE YOU MOVING ?

If you want your subscription to ASIMOV'S to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the zip codes for both, please!) to our subscription department:

ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
P.O. Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130

"Move over, Kurt Vonnegut.
James Morrow has put on the mantle of
America's best satirist." — James Gunn

BLAMELESS
IN
ABADDON

A NOVEL

JAMES MORROW

The sequel to the critically acclaimed satirical novel
Towing Jehovah, winner of the 1995 World Fantasy Award

PHOTO: DAVID TAIT

"An epic miniseries directed by Stanley Kubrick, scripted by Ambrose Bierce, with special effects by Hieronymous Bosch *might* begin to do justice to James Morrow's *Blameless in Abaddon*—but only if they get Jim Carrey to play Saint Augustine."

—Jonathan Lethem

"Daren't read *Blameless* until I've finished —may steal too many ideas..."

—Arthur C. Clarke

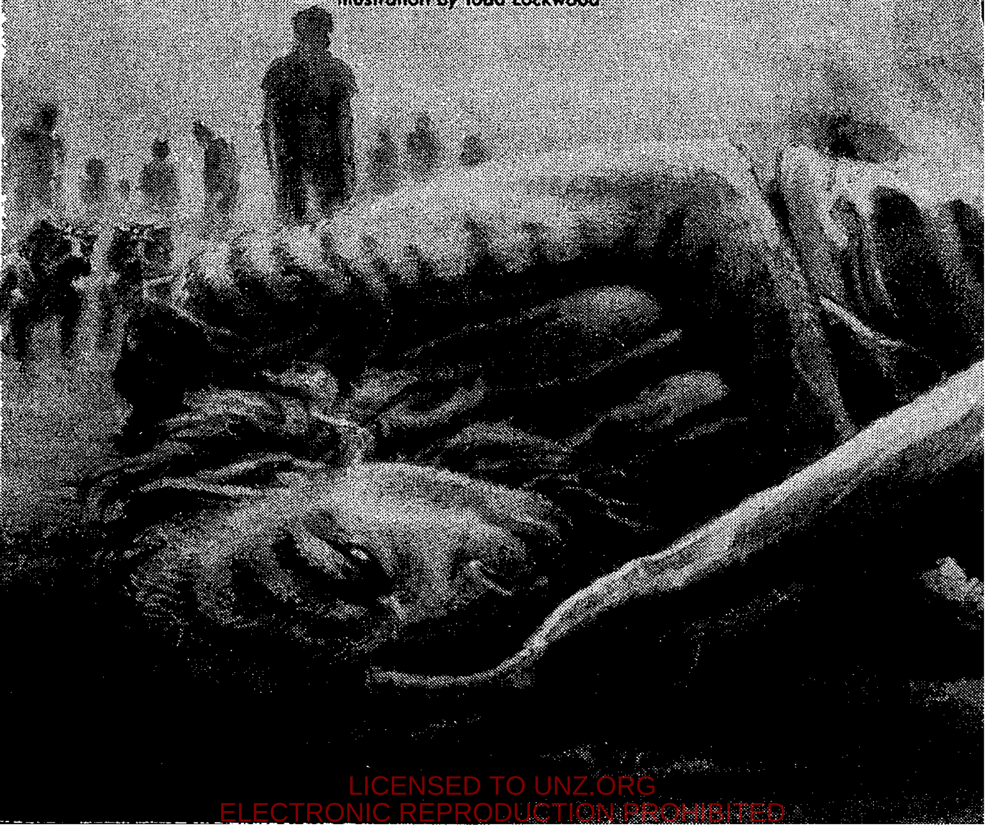
HARCOURT
BRACE

Nancy Kress

THE FLOWERS OF AULIT PRISON

The author's latest book is *Oaths and Miracles*, a thriller about Mafia penetration of the biotech industry. It was published by Forge earlier this year. The concluding novel in her highly regarded *Beggars* trilogy, *Beggars Ride*, will be published by Tor next month. One of our most recent stories from Ms. Kress, the powerful novella "Fault Lines" (August 1995), is currently a finalist for the 1996 Hugo award. We are pleased that she has returned to our pages with another stunning tale.

Illustration by Todd Lockwood



My sister lies sweetly on the bed across the room from mine. She lies on her back, fingers lightly curled, her legs stretched straight as elindel trees. Her pert little nose, much prettier than my own, pokes delicately into the air. Her skin glows like a fresh flower. But not with health. She is, of course, dead.

I slip out of my bed and stand swaying a moment, with morning dizziness. A Terran healer once told me my blood pressure was too low, which is the sort of nonsensical thing Terrans will sometimes say—like announcing the air is too moist. The air is what it is, and so am I.

What I am is a murderer.

I kneel in front of my sister's glass coffin. My mouth has that awful morning taste, even though last night I drank nothing stronger than water. Almost I yawn, but at the last moment I turn it into a narrow-lipped ringing in my ears that somehow leaves my mouth tasting worse than ever. But at least I haven't disrespected Ano. She was my only sibling and closest friend, until I replaced her with illusion.

"Two more years, Ano," I say, "less forty-two days. Then you will be free And so will I."

Ano, of course, says nothing. There is no need. She knows as well as I the time until her burial, when she can be released from the chemicals and glass that bind her dead body and can rejoin our ancestors. Others I have known whose relatives were under atonement bondage said the bodies complained and recriminated, especially in dreams, making the house a misery. Ano is more considerate. Her corpse never troubles me at all. I do that to myself.

I finish the morning prayers, leap up, and stagger dizzily to the piss closet. I may not have drunk pel last night, but my bladder is nonetheless bursting.

At noon a messenger rides into my yard on a Terran bicycle. The bicycle is an attractive design, sloping, with interesting curves. Adapted for our market, undoubtedly. The messenger is less attractive, a surly boy probably in his first year of government service. When I smile at him, he looks away. He would rather be someplace else. Well, if he doesn't perform his messenger duties with more courteous cheer, he will be.

"Letter for Uli Pek Bengarin."

"I am Uli Pek Bengarin."

Scowling, he hands me the letter and pedals away. I don't take the scowl personally. The boy does not, of course, know what I am, any more than my neighbors do. That would defeat the whole point. I am supposed to pass as fully real, until I can earn the right to resume being so.

The letter is shaped into a utilitarian circle, very business-like, with a generic government seal. It could have come from the Tax Section, or Community Relief, or Processions and Rituals. But of course it hasn't;

none of those sections would write to me until I am real again. The sealed letter is from Reality and Atonement. It's a summons; they have a job for me.

And about time. I have been home nearly six weeks since the last job, shaping my flowerbeds and polishing dishes and trying to paint a skyscape of last month's synchrony, when all six moons were visible at once. I paint badly. It is time for another job.

I pack my shoulder sack, kiss the glass of my sister's coffin, and lock the house. Then I wheel my bicycle—not, alas, as interestingly curved as the messenger's—out of its shed and pedal down the dusty road toward the city.

Frablit Pek Brimmidin is nervous. This interests me; Pek Brimmidin is usually a calm, controlled man, the sort who never replaces reality with illusion. He's given me my previous jobs with no fuss. But now he actually can't sit still; he fidgets back and forth across his small office, which is cluttered with papers, stone sculptures in an exaggerated style I don't like at all, and plates of half-eaten food. I don't comment on either the food or the pacing. I am fond of Pek Brimmidin, quite apart from my gratitude to him, which is profound. He was the official in R&A who voted to give me a chance to become real again. The other two judges voted for perpetual death, no chance of atonement. I'm not supposed to know this much detail about my own case, but I do. Pek Brimmidin is middle-aged, a stocky man whose neck fur has just begun to yellow. His eyes are gray, and kind.

"Pek Bengarin," he says, finally, and then stops.

"I stand ready to serve," I say softly, so as not to make him even more nervous. But something is growing heavy in my stomach. This does not look good.

"Pek Bengarin." Another pause. "You are an informer."

"I stand ready to serve our shared reality," I repeat, despite my astonishment. Of course I'm an informer. I've been an informer for two years and eighty-two days. I killed my sister, and I will be an informer until my atonement is over, I can be fully real again, and Ano can be released from death to join our ancestors. Pek Brimmidin knows this. He's assigned me every one of my previous informing jobs, from the first easy one in currency counterfeiting right through the last one, in baby stealing. I'm a very good informer, as Pek Brimmidin also knows. What's wrong with the man?

Suddenly Pek Brimmidin straightens. But he doesn't look me in the eye. "You are an informer, and the Section for Reality and Atonement has an informing job for you. In Aulit Prison."

So that's it. I go still. Aulit Prison holds criminals. Not just those who have tried to get away with stealing or cheating or child-snatching, which are, after all, normal. Aulit Prison holds those who are unreal, who have succumbed to the illusion that they are not part of shared common reality and so may do violence to the most concrete reality of others: their physical bodies. Maimers. Rapists. Murderers.

Like me.

I feel my left hand tremble, and I strive to control it and to not show how hurt I am. I thought Pek Brimmidin thought better of me. There is of course no such thing as partial atonement—one is either real or one is not—but a part of my mind nonetheless thought that Pek Brimmidin had recognized two years and eighty-two days of effort in regaining my reality. I have worked so hard.

He must see some of this on my face because he says quickly, "I am sorry to assign this job to you, Pek. I wish I had a better one. But you've been requested specifically by Rafkit Sarloe." Requested by the capital; my spirits lift slightly. "They've added a note to the request. I am authorized to tell you the informant job carries additional compensation. If you succeed, your debt will be considered immediately paid, and you can be restored at once to reality."

Restored at once to reality. I would again be a full member of World, without shame. Entitled to live in the real world of shared humanity, and to hold my head up with pride. And Ano could be buried, the artificial chemicals washed from her body, so that it could return to World and her sweet spirit could join our ancestors. Ano, too, would be restored to reality.

"I'll do it," I tell Pek Brimmidin. And then, formally, "I stand ready to serve our shared reality."

"One more thing, before you agree, Pek Bengarin." Pek Brimmidin is fidgeting again. "The suspect is a Terran."

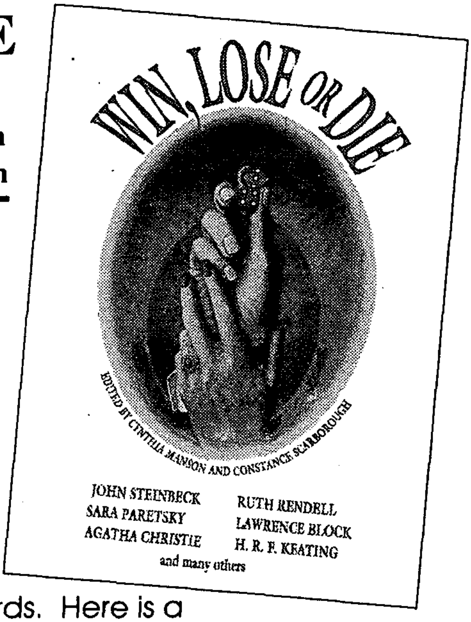
I have never before informed on a Terran. Aulit Prison, of course, holds those aliens who have been judged unreal: Terrans, Fallers, the weird little Huhuhubs. The problem is that even after thirty years of ships coming to World, there is still considerable debate about whether *any* aliens are real at all. Clearly their bodies exist; after all, here they are. But their thinking is so disordered they might almost qualify as all being unable to recognize shared social reality, and so just as unreal as those poor empty children who never attain reason and must be destroyed.

Usually we on World just leave the aliens alone, except of course for trading with them. The Terrans in particular offer interesting objects, such as bicycles, and ask in return worthless items, mostly perfectly obvious information. But do any of the aliens have souls, capable of recognizing and honoring a shared reality with the souls of others? At the universities, the argument goes on. Also in market squares and pel shops, which is where I hear it. Personally, I think aliens may well be real. I try not to be a bigot.

The Odds Are for Murder

WIN, LOSE OR DIE

Edited by Cynthia Manson and Constance Scarborough


WIN, LOSE OR DIE
EDITED BY CYNTHIA MANSON AND CONSTANCE SCARBOROUGH
JOHN STEINBECK
SARA PARETSKY
AGATHA CHRISTIE
RUTH RENDELL
LAWRENCE BLOCK
H. R. F. KEATING
and many others

An up-all-night anthology of murderous games from top-name crime writers. These stories' stakes are always life and death, although the games range from poker and chess to Scrabble and crosswords. Here is a page-turning selection of risk-taking tales from masters and newcomers, including Agatha Christie, Anthony Boucher, John Steinbeck, Ellery Queen, H. R. F. Keating, Ruth Rendell, Lawrence Block, Sara Paretsky, Bill Pronzini, and more.

Please send me _____ copies of *Win, Lose or Die*. I enclose my check for _____ ($23.00 plus $2.50 for postage & handling for each copy). NY State residents: add 8.25% sales tax to your order. Send orders to: Dept. 106AS, Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 260 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10001.

Name ____________________

Address ____________________

City ____________ State _____ ZIP ____________

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I say to Pek Brimmidin, "I am willing to inform on a Terran."

He wiggles his hand in pleasure. "Good, good. You will enter Aulit Prison a Capmonth before the suspect is brought there. You will use your primary cover, please."

I nod, although Pek Brimmidin knows this is not easy for me. My primary cover is the truth: I killed my sister Ano Pek Bengarin two years and eighty-two days ago and was judged unreal enough for perpetual death, never able to join my ancestors. The only untrue part of the cover is that I escaped and have been hiding from the Section police ever since.

"You have just been captured," Pek Brimmidin continues, "and assigned to the first part of your death in Aulit. The Section records will show this."

Again I nod, not looking at him. The first part of my death in Aulit, the second, when the time came, in the kind of chemical bondage that holds Ano. And never ever to be freed—*ever*. What if it were true? I should go mad. Many do.

"The suspect is named 'Carryl Walters.' He is a Terran healer. He murdered a World child, in an experiment to discover how real people's brains function. His sentence is perpetual death. But the Section believes that Carryl Walters was working with a group of World people in these experiments. That somewhere on World there is a group that's so lost its hold on reality that it would murder children to investigate science."

For a moment the room wavers, including the exaggerated swooping curves of Pek Brimmidin's ugly sculptures. But then I get hold of myself. I am an informer, and a good one. I can do this. I am redeeming myself, and releasing Ano. I am an informer.

"I'll find out who this group is," I say. "And what they're doing, and where they are."

Pek Brimmidin smiles at me. "Good." His trust is a dose of shared reality: two people acknowledging their common perceptions together, without lies or violence. I need this dose. It is probably the last one I will have for a long time.

How do people manage in perpetual death, fed on only solitary illusion? Aulit Prison must be full of the mad.

Traveling to Aulit takes two days of hard riding. Somewhere my bicycle loses a bolt and I wheel it to the next village. The woman who runs the bicycle shop is competent but mean, the sort who gazes at shared reality mostly to pick out the ugly parts.

"At least it's not a *Terran* bicycle."

"At least," I say, but she is incapable of recognizing sarcasm.

"Sneaky soulless criminals, taking us over bit by bit. We should never have allowed them in. And the government is supposed to protect us from unreal slime, ha, what a joke. Your bolt is a nonstandard size."

"Is it?" I say.

"Yes. Costs you extra."

I nod. Behind the open rear door of the shop, two little girls play in a thick stand of moonweed.

"We should kill all the aliens," the repairer says. "No shame in destroying them before they corrupt us."

"Eurummmn," I say. Informers are not supposed to make themselves conspicuous with political debate. Above the two children's heads, the moonweed bends gracefully in the wind. One of the little girls has long brown neck fur, very pretty. The other does not.

"There, that bolt will hold fine. Where you from?"

"Rafkit Sarloe." Informers never name their villages.

She gives an exaggerated shudder. "I would never visit the capital. Too many aliens. They destroy *our* participation in shared reality without a moment's thought! Three and eight, please."

I want to say *No one but you can destroy your own participation in shared reality,* but I don't. Silently I pay her the money.

She glares at me, at the world. "You don't believe me about the Terrans. But I know what I know!"

I ride away, through the flowered countryside. In the sky, only Cap is visible, rising on the horizon opposite the sun. Cap glows with a clear white smoothness, like Ano's skin.

The Terrans, I am told, have only one moon. Shared reality on their world is, perhaps, skimpier than ours: less curved, less rich, less warm.

Are they ever jealous?

Aulit prison sits on a flat plain inland from the South Coast. I know that other islands on World have their own prisons, just as they have their own governments, but only Aulit is used for the alien unreal, as well as our own. A special agreement among the governments of World makes this possible. The alien governments protest, but of course it does them no good. The unreal is the unreal, and far too painful and dangerous to have running around loose. Besides, the alien governments are far away on other stars.

Aulit is huge and ugly, a straight-lined monolith of dull red stone, with no curves anywhere. An official from R&A meets me and turns me over to two prison guards. We enter through a barred gate, my bicycle chained to the guards', and I to my bicycle. I am led across a wide dusty yard toward a stone wall. The guards of course don't speak to me; I am unreal.

My cell is square, twice my length on a side. There is a bed, a piss pot, a table, and a single chair. The door is without a window, and all the other doors in the row of cells are closed.

"When will the prisoners be allowed to be all together?" I ask, but of course the guard doesn't answer me. I am not real.

I sit in my chair and wait. Without a clock, it's difficult to judge time, but I think a few hours pass totally without event. Then a gong sounds and my door slides up into the ceiling. Ropes and pulleys, controlled from above, inaccessible from inside the cell.

The corridor fills with illusionary people. Men and women, some with yellowed neck fur and sunken eyes, walking with the shuffle of old age. Some young, striding along with that dangerous mixture of anger and desperation. And the aliens.

I have seen aliens before, but not so many together. Fallers, about our size but very dark, as if burned crisp by their distant star. They wear their neck fur very long and dye it strange bright colors, although not in prison. Terrans, who don't even have neck fur but instead fur on their heads, which they sometimes cut into fanciful curves—rather pretty. Terrans are a little intimidating because of their size. They move slowly. Ano, who had one year at the university before I killed her, once told me that the Terrans' world makes them feel lighter than ours does. I don't understand this, but Ano was very intelligent and so it's probably true. She also explained that Fallers, Terrans, and World people are somehow related far back in time, but this is harder to believe. Perhaps Ano was mistaken.

Nobody ever thinks Huhuhubs could be related to us. Tiny, scuttling, ugly, dangerous, they walk on all fours. They're covered with warts. They smell bad. I was glad to see only a few of them, sticking close together, in the corridor at Aulit.

We all move toward a large room filled with rough tables and chairs and, in the corner, a trough for the Huhuhubs. The food is already on the tables. Cereal, flatbread, elindel fruit—very basic, but nutritious. What surprises me most is the total absence of guards. Apparently prisoners are allowed to do whatever they wish to the food, the room, or each other, without interference. Well, why not? We aren't real.

I need protection, quickly.

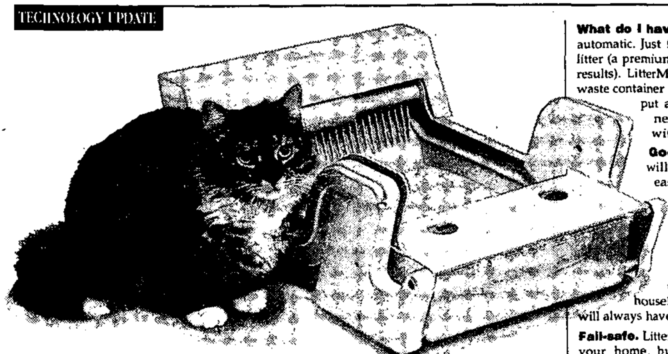
I choose a group of two women and three men. They sit at a table with their backs to the wall, and others have left a respectful distance around them. From the way they group themselves, the oldest woman is the leader. I plant myself in front of her and look directly into her face. A long scar ridges her left cheek to disappear into grizzled neck fur.

"I am Uli Pek Bengarin," I say, my voice even but too low to be heard beyond this group. "In Aulit for the murder of my sister. I can be useful to you."

She doesn't speak, and her flat dark eyes don't waver, but I have her attention. Other prisoners watch furtively.

"I know an informer among the guards. He knows I know. He brings things into Aulit for me, in return for not sharing his name."

Still her eyes don't waver. But I see she believes me; the sheer outrage



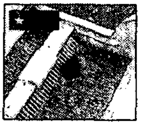
Never scoop cat litter again... Computer technology creates the only self-cleaning litter box!

You and your cat will love the way LitterMaid eliminates the hassle, mess and odor of the ordinary litter box.

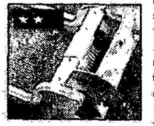
by Shirley Liberles

Computer technology revolutionizes the litter box...

LitterMaid, a patented product from Waters Research Company, is a completely self-cleaning litter box operated by a microprocessor, but your cat uses it just like a normal litter box. Approximately 10 minutes after LitterMaid's "electric eye" *senses that your cat has exited the litter* box, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. ★ The comb sifts through the litter, scooping up any waste. ★★ The waste is deposited into a sealed, air-tight waste container and the comb returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. The system resets, ready to repeat its cycle the next time your cat uses tha litter box. ★★★ When the waste container is full, you can either throw it away and put a new one in its place or empty it and reuse it for up to one year!



★



★★

★★★

House cats. Large or small, affectionate or independent, young or old, long-haired or short, they all create the same dilemma for their owners—the litter box.

There are few things I can think of that are as foul as cleaning the litter box at my house. Even when I clean it daily, it's difficult to keep odor away. And this problem is multiplied because I have two cats! But because I love them, and that's virtually all the maintenance they require, I do it...because there's no other option.

Well, today there's a solution that cat owners across the country will be thrilled about. LitterMaid, manufactured by Waters Research, is destined to make ordinary litter boxes obsolete!

Automatic cleaning. LitterMaid is a computerized, completely self-cleaning litter box. Its operation is controlled by a microprocessor. An electric eye senses when the cat has exited the litter box, and minutes later, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. The comb sifts through the litter, scoops up any waste, and deposits it into a sealed, air-tight disposable waste container. The comb then returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. LitterMaid is now ready to begin another cycle as soon as necessary.

Revolutionary. LitterMaid may permanently change the face of the cat-product industry. Cat owners will never again have to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning their cat's litter box. Plus, there will be no more embarrassing litter-box odor in your home, because the disposable waste container is sealed and totally air-tight!

What do I have to do? LitterMaid is fully automatic. Just fill the pan with *clumping* cat litter (a premium brand will provide the best results). LitterMaid does the rest! When the waste container is full, just throw it away and put a new one in its place. You'll never have unsanitary contact with cat waste again!

Good for your cat. Not only will LitterMaid make *your* life easier, it will make the litter box a nicer place for your cat. Most cats dislike using litter boxes that are dirty, and that can lead to them not going to the bathroom. Or worse, they may choose to use the bathroom around the house! With LitterMaid, your cat will always have a healthy, clean litter box.

Fail-safe. LitterMaid plugs into any outlet in your home, but it can also operate on eight "D" batteries. So even in the event of a power failure, LitterMaid will continue cleaning. It is equipped with an alarm that alerts you when the batteries are running low.

Put it anywhere. LitterMaid is only a couple inches longer and taller than conventional cat litter boxes. It should fit easily where your litter box is now—and you should put it there at first, until your cat gets used to it. But later, because LitterMaid is odorless and sanitary, you have the opportunity to place it virtually anywhere in your home—without any ordinary litter-box worries!

LitterMaid eliminates...

- *Embarrassing litter-box odors*
- *Having to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning your cat's litter box*
- *Limiting the areas within your home in which you can place the litter box*
- *Worrying about how to clean the litter box if you go on vacation*
- *Having a cat who refuses to use the litter box because it's dirty*
- *Some risk of catching a disease from the cat's waste—this is especially important for pregnant women and people with immune deficiencies*

Try it risk-free. LitterMaid is backed by our exclusive risk-free home trial. Try it, and if you're not completely satisfied, return it within 90 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked." It's also backed by a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty.

LitterMaid System	**$199**	$16 S&H
Waste container refills (4)	**$11**	$4 S&H

Please mention promotional code 1233-AS-1551.

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966

To order by mail, send check or money order for the total amount including S&H (VA residents add 4.5% sales tax). To charge it, enclose your account number and exp. date.

COMTRAD INDUSTRIES

2820 Waterford Lake Drive, Suite 106
Midlothian, Virginia 23113

of my statement has convinced her. A guard who had already forfeited reality by informing—by violating shared reality—might easily turn it to less pernicious material advantage. Once reality is torn, the rents grow. For the same reason, she easily believes that I might violate my supposed agreement with the guard.

"What sort of things?" she says, carelessly. Her voice is raspy and thick, like some hairy root.

"Letters. Candy. Pel." Intoxicants are forbidden in prison; they promote shared conviviality, to which the unreal have no right.

"Weapons?"

"Perhaps," I say.

"And why shouldn't I beat this guard's name out of you and set up my own arrangement with him?"

"He will not. He is my cousin." This is the trickiest part of the cover provided to me by R&A Section; it requires that my would-be protector believe in a person who has kept enough sense of reality to honor family ties but will nonetheless violate a larger shared reality. I told Pek Brimmidin that I doubted that such a twisted state of mind would be very stable, and so a seasoned prisoner would not believe in it. But Pek Brimmidin was right and I was wrong. The woman nods.

"All right. Sit down."

She does not ask what I wish in return for the favors of my supposed cousin. She knows. I sit beside her, and from now on I am physically safe in Aulit Prison from all but her.

Next, I must somehow befriend a Terran.

This proves harder than I expect. The Terrans keep to themselves, and so do we. They are just as violent toward their own as all the mad doomed souls in Aulit; the place is every horror whispered by children trying to shock each other. Within a tenday, I see two World men hold down and rape a woman. No one interferes. I see a Terran gang beat a Faller. I see a World woman knife another woman, who bleeds to death on the stone floor. This is the only time guards appear, heavily armored. A priest is with them. He wheels in a coffin of chemicals and immediately immerses the body so that it cannot decay to release the prisoner from her sentence of perpetual death.

At night, isolated in my cell, I dream that Frablit Pek Brimmidin appears and rescinds my provisional reality. The knifed, doomed corpse becomes Ano; her attacker becomes me. I wake from the dream moaning and weeping. The tears are not grief but terror. My life, and Ano's, hang from the splintery branch of a criminal alien I have not yet even met.

I know who he is, though. I skulk as close as I dare to the Terran groups, listening. I don't speak their language, of course, but Pek Brimmidin taught me to recognize the cadences of "Carryl Walters" in several of their dialects. Carryl Walters is an old Terran, with gray head fur cut in boring straight lines, wrinkled brownish skin, and sunken eyes. But his ten fingers—how do they keep the extra ones from tangling them up?—are long and quick.

It takes me only a day to realize that Carryl Walters's own people leave him alone, surrounding him with the same nonviolent respect that my protector gets. It takes me much longer to figure out why. Carryl Walters is not dangerous, neither a protector nor a punisher. I don't think he has any private shared realities with the guards. I don't understand until the World woman is knifed.

It happens in the courtyard, on a cool day in which I am gazing hungrily at the one patch of bright sky overhead. The knifed woman screams. The murderer pulls the knife from her belly and blood shoots out. In seconds the ground is drenched. The woman doubles over. Everyone looks the other way except me. And Carryl Walters runs over with his old-man stagger and kneels over the body, trying uselessly to save the life of a woman already dead anyway.

Of course. He is a healer. The Terrans don't bother him because they know that, next time, it might be they who have need of him.

I feel stupid for not realizing this right away. I am supposed to be *good* at informing. Now I'll have to make it up by immediate action. The problem, of course, is that no one will attack me while I'm under Afa Pek Fakar's protection, and provoking Pek Fakar herself is far too dangerous.

I can see only one way to do this.

I wait a few days. Outside in the courtyard, I sit quietly against the prison wall and breathe shallowly. After a few minutes I leap up. The dizziness takes me; I worsen it by holding my breath. Then I ram as hard as I can into the rough stone wall and slide down it. Pain tears through my arm and forehead. One of Pek Fakar's men shouts something.

Pek Fakar is there in a minute. I hear her—hear all of them—through a curtain of dizziness and pain.

"—just *ran* into the wall, I saw it—"

"—told me she gets these dizzy attacks—"

"—head broken in—"

I gasp, through sudden real nausea, "The healer. The Terran—"

"The Terran?" Pek Fakar's voice, hard with sudden suspicion. But I gasp out more words, ". . . disease . . . a Terran told me . . . since childhood . . . without help I . . ." My vomit, unplanned but useful, spews over her boots.

"Get the Terran," Pek Fakar rasps to somebody. "And a towel!"

Then Carryl Walters bends over me. I clutch his arm, try to smile, and pass out.

When I come to, I am lying inside, on the floor of the eating hall, the

Terran cross-legged beside me. A few World people hover near the far wall, scowling. Carryl Walters says, "How many fingers you see?"

"Four. Aren't you supposed to have five?"

He unbends the fifth from behind his palm and says, "You fine."

"No, I'm not," I say. He speaks childishly, and with an odd accent, but he's understandable. "I have a disease. Another Terran healer told me so."

"Who?"

"Her name was Anna Pek Rakov."

"What disease?"

"I don't remember. Something in the head. I get spells."

"What spells? You fall, flop on floor?"

"No. Yes. Sometimes. Sometimes it takes me differently." I look directly into his eyes. Strange eyes, smaller than mine, and that improbable blue. "Pek Rakov told me I could die during a spell, without help."

He does not react to the lie. Or maybe he does, and I don't know how to read it. I have never informed on a Terran before. Instead he says something grossly obscene, even for Aulit Prison: "Why you unreal? What you do?"

I move my gaze from his. "I murdered my sister." If he asks for details, I will cry. My head aches too hard.

He says, "I sorry."

Is he sorry that he asked, or that I killed Ano? Pek Rakov was not like this; she had some manners. I say, "The other Terran healer said I should be watched carefully by someone who knows what to do if I get a spell. Do you know what to do, Pek Walters?"

"Yes."

"Will you watch me?"

"Yes." He is, in fact, watching me closely now. I touch my head; there is a cloth tied around it where I bashed myself. The headache is worse. My hand comes away sticky with blood.

I say, "In return for what?"

"What you give Pek Fakar for protection?"

He is smarter than I thought. "Nothing I can also share with you." She would punish me hard.

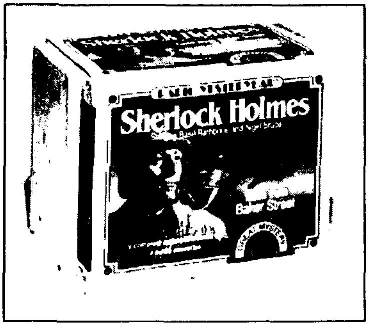
"Then I watch you, you give me information about World."

I nod; this is what Terrans usually request. And where information is given, it can also be extracted. "I will explain your presence to Pek Fakar," I say, before the pain in my head swamps me without warning, and everything in the dining hall blurs and sears together.

Pek Fakar doesn't like it. But I have just given her a gun, smuggled in by my "cousin." I leave notes for the prison administration in my cell, under my bed. While the prisoners are in the courtyard—which we are every day, no matter what the weather—the notes are replaced by what-

From our "GREAT MYSTERY" audio cassette series...

Elementary, My Dear Listener!



SHERLOCK HOLMES
• on •
RADIO!

"Tales from Baker Street"
starring
Basil Rathbone & Nigel Bruce

8 complete radio adventures.
FOUR SOLID HOURS OF DRAMATIC DETECTION!
in an attractive wooden gift crate!

Featuring these perplexing cases: ***The Woman***, ***The Case of the Accidental Murderess***, ***The Manor House Case***, ***The Great Gandolfo***, ***The Gunpowder Plot***, ***The Adventure of the Speckled Band***, ***Murder by Moonlight***, and ***The Adventure of the Retired Colourman***, all from the 1940s, The "Golden Age" of Radio Drama!

RADIO YESTERYEAR®
Box C, Sandy Hook, CT 06482 or call
1-800-243-0987

Please make checks or money orders payable to Radio Yesteryear. Or you can **charge it** on **VISA, MasterCard, American Express, Diners Club, Carte Blanche** or **Discover**.

Credit Card Number

Signature

Expiration Date

© 1993 Radio Yesteryear

YES! Send me ______ Sherlock Holmes crates at $16.95 each. Please include $3.00 shipping and handling and applicable sales tax.

Total enclosed $__________

Name__________

Address__________

City__________

State/Zip__________

Dept. 106AS

ever I ask for. Pek Fakar had demanded a "weapon"; neither of us expected a Terran gun. She is the only person in the prison to have such a thing. It is to me a stark reminder that no one would care if all we unreal killed each other off completely. There is no one else to shoot; we never see anyone not already in perpetual death.

"Without Pek Walters, I might have another spell and die," I say to the scowling Pek Fakar. "He knows a special Terran method of flexing the brain to bring me out of a spell."

"He can teach this special method to me."

"So far, no World person has been able to learn it. Their brains are different from ours."

She glares at me. But no one, even those lost to reality, can deny that alien brains are weird. And my injuries are certainly real: bloody head cloth, left eye closed from swelling, skin scraped raw the length of my left cheek, bruised arm. She strokes the Terran gun, a boringly straight-lined cylinder of dull metal. "All right. You may keep the Terran near you—if he agrees. Why should he?"

I smile at her slowly. Pek Fakar never shows a response to flattery; to do so would be to show weakness. But she understands. Or thinks she does. I have threatened the Terran with her power, and the whole prison now knows that her power extends among the aliens as well as her own people. She goes on glaring, but she is not displeased. In her hand, the gun gleams.

And so begin my conversations with a Terran.

Talking with Carryl Pek Walters is embarrassing and frustrating. He sits beside me in the eating hall or the courtyard and publicly scratches his head. When he is cheerful, he makes shrill horrible whistling noises between his teeth. He mentions topics that belong only among kin: the state of his skin (which has odd brown lumps on it) and his lungs (clogged with fluid, apparently). He does not know enough to begin conversations with ritual comments on flowers. It is like talking to a child, but a child who suddenly begins discussing bicycle engineering or university law.

"You think individual means very little, group means everything," he says.

We are sitting in the courtyard, against a stone wall, a little apart from the other prisoners. Some watch us furtively, some openly. I am angry. I am often angry with Pek Walters. This is not going as I'd planned.

"How can you say that? The individual is very important on World! We care for each other so that no individual is left out of our common reality, except by his own acts!"

"Exactly," Pek Walters says. He has just learned this word from me. "You care for others so no one left alone. Alone is bad. Act alone is bad. Only together is real."

"Of course," I say. Could he be stupid after all? "Reality is always shared. Is a star really there if only one eye can perceive its light?"

He smiles and says something in his own language, which makes no sense to me. He repeats it in real words. "When tree falls in forest, is sound if no person hears?"

"But—do you mean to say that on your star, people believe they . . ." What? I can't find the words.

He says, "People believe they always real, alone or together. Real even when other people say they dead. Real even when they do something very bad. Even when they murder."

"But they're not real! How could they be? They've violated shared reality! If I don't acknowledge you, the reality of your soul, if I send you to your ancestors without your consent, that is proof that I don't understand reality and so am not seeing it! Only the unreal could do that!"

"Baby not see shared reality. Is baby unreal?"

"Of course. Until the age when children attain reason, they are unreal."

"Then when I kill baby, is all right, because I not kill real person?"

"Of course it's not all right! When one kills a baby, one kills its chance to become real, before it could even join its ancestors! And also all the chances of the babies to which it might become ancestor. No one would kill a baby on World, not even these dead souls in Aulit! Are you saying that on Terra, people would kill babies?"

He looks at something I cannot see. "Yes."

My chance has arrived, although not in a form I relish. Still, I have a job to do. I say, "I have heard that Terrans will kill people for science. Even babies. To find out the kinds of things that Anna Pek Rakov knew about my brain. Is that true?"

"Yes and no."

"How can it be yes *and* no? Are children ever used for science experiments?"

"Yes."

"What kinds of experiments?"

"You should ask, what kind children? Dying children. Children not born yet. Children born . . . wrong. With no brain, or broken brain."

I struggle with all this. Dying children . . . he must mean not children who are really dead, but those in the transition to join their ancestors. Well, that would not be so bad, provided the bodies were then allowed to decay properly and release the souls. Children without brains or with broken brains . . . not bad, either. Such poor unreal things would be destroyed anyway. But children not born yet . . . in or out of the mother's womb? I push this away, to discuss another time. I am on a different path.

"And you never use living, real children for science?"

He gives me a look I cannot read. So much of Terran expression is still strange. "Yes. We use. In some experiments. Experiments who not hurt children."

"Like what?" I say. We are staring directly at each other now. Suddenly I wonder if this old Terran suspects that I am an informer seeking information, and that is why he accepted my skimpy story about having spells. That would not necessarily be bad. There are ways to bargain with the unreal once everyone admits that bargaining is what is taking place. But I'm not sure whether Pek Walters knows that.

He says, "Experiments who study how brain work. Such as, how memory work. Including shared memory."

"Memory? Memory doesn't 'work.' It just is."

"No. Memory work. By memory-building pro-teenz." He uses a Terran word, then adds, "Tiny little pieces of food," which makes no sense. What does food have to do with memory? You don't eat memories, or obtain them from food. But I am further down the path, and I use his words to go further still.

"Does memory in World people work with the same . . . 'pro-teenz' as Terran memory?"

"Yes and no. Some same or almost same. Some different." He is watching me very closely.

"How do you know that memory works the same or different in World people? Have Terrans done brain experiments on World?"

"Yes."

"With World children?"

"Yes."

I watch a group of Huhuhubs across the courtyard. The smelly little aliens are clustered together in some kind of ritual or game. "And have you, personally, participated in these science experiments on children, Pek Walters?"

He doesn't answer me. Instead he smiles, and if I didn't know better, I'd swear the smile was sad. He says, "Pek Bengarin, why you kill your sister?"

The unexpectedness of it—now, so close to almost learning something useful—outrages me. Not even Pek Fakar had asked me that. I stare at him angrily. He says, "I know, I not should ask. Wrong for ask. But I tell you much, and answer is important—"

"But the question is obscene. You should not ask. World people are not so cruel to each other."

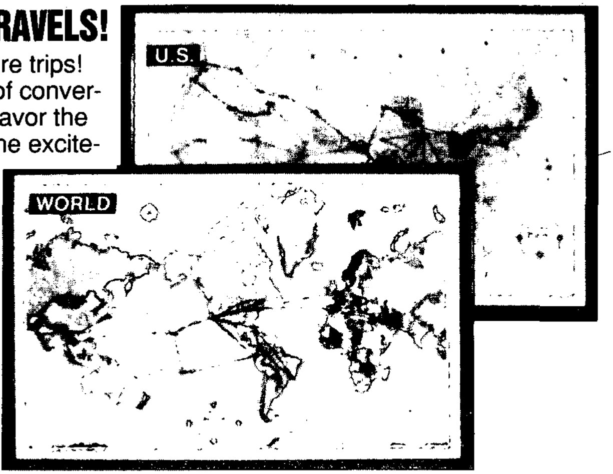
"Even people damned in Aulit Prison?" he says, and even though I don't know one of the words he uses, I see that yes, he recognizes that I am an informer. And that I have been seeking information. All right, so much the better. But I need time to set my questions on a different path.

To gain time, I repeat my previous point. "World people are not so cruel."

CHART YOUR TRAVELS!

Record past & future trips! Stimulate a world of conversational interest. Savor the memories. Enjoy the excitement of planning your travels! Excellent for reference and charting business territories.

All maps are in full color, framed and come with charting kit including map pins, charting ruler and marking pen.



THREE SIZES AVAILABLE

STANDARD 30" x 20" printed on heavy artcraft stock. Framed in rich walnut finish wood. Ready to hang. World or U.S. **$38.00** **(2 or more $35.00 each)**

DELUXE 33" x 22" map laminated with thick 10-mil Poly-Mylar™ film. Surface can be wiped clean. Framed in rich walnut finish wood. Ready to hang. World or U.S. **$49.50** **(2 or more $45.00 each)**

KINGSIZE 52" x 34" map laminated with thick 10-mil Poly-Mylar™ film. Surface can be wiped clean. Framed in gold anodized aluminum. Easy to assemble. World or U.S. **$99.50** **(2 or more $95.00 each)**

PERSONALIZED: Name hand lettered add $5 ea.

ADD $5 FOR SHIPPING & HANDLING

VISA, M/C phone orders

1-800-322-1866

In California (213) 965-9380

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

THE CHART HOUSE TRAVEL MAP CO., INC.
5222 Venice Blvd., L.A., CA 90019Dept. 106AS

☐ Standard ☐ Deluxe ☐ Kingsize
☐ World ☐ U.S. ☐ World ☐ U.S. ☐ World ☐ U.S.

Send ____________maps $ ____________Total.

☐ VISA ☐ MASTERCARD ☐ Check enclosed

Card # ________________________ Exp. __________

Name ____

Address ______________________________________

City, State, Zip ________________________________

"Then you—"

The air suddenly sizzles, smelling of burning. People shout. I look up. Aka Pek Fakar stands in the middle of the courtyard with the Terran gun, firing it at the Huhuhubs. One by one they drop as the beam of light hits them and makes a sizzling hole. The aliens pass into the second stage of their perpetual death.

I stand and tug on Pek Walters's arm. "Come on. We must clear the area immediately or the guards will release poison gas."

"Why?"

"So they can get the bodies into bondage chemicals, of course!" Does this alien think the prison officials would let the unreal get even a little bit decayed? I thought that after our several conversations, Pek Walters understood more than that.

He rises slowly, haltingly, to his feet. Pek Fakar, laughing, strolls toward the door, the gun still in her hand.

Pek Walters says, "World people not cruel?"

Behind us, the bodies of the Huhuhubs lie sprawled across each other, smoking.

The next time we are herded from our cells into the dining hall and then the courtyard, the Huhuhub corpses are of course gone. Pek Walters has developed a cough. He walks more slowly, and once, on the way to our usual spot against the far wall, he puts a hand on my arm to steady himself.

"Are you sick, Pek?"

"Exactly," he says.

"But you are a healer. Make the cough disappear."

He smiles, and sinks gratefully against the wall. " 'Healer, heal own self.' "

"What?"

"Nothing. So you are informer, Pek Bengarin, and you hope I tell you something about science experiments on children on World."

I take a deep breath. Pek Fakar passes us, carrying her gun. Two of her own people now stay close beside her at all times, in case another prisoner tries to take the gun away from her. I cannot believe anyone would try, but maybe I'm wrong. There's no telling what the unreal will do. Pek Walters watches her pass, and his smile is gone. Yesterday Pek Fakar shot another person, this time not even an alien. There is a note under my bed requesting more guns.

I say, "*You* say I am an informer. I do not say it."

"Exactly," Pek Walters says. He has another coughing spell, then closes his eyes wearily. "I have not an-tee-by-otics."

Another Terran word. Carefully I repeat it. " 'An-tee-by-otics'?"

"Pro-teenz for heal."

Again that word for very small bits of food. I make use of it. "Tell me about the pro-teenz in the science experiments."

"I tell you everything about experiments. But only if you answer questions first."

He will ask about my sister. For no reason other than rudeness and cruelty. I feel my face turn to stone.

He says, "Tell me why steal baby not so bad for make person unreal always."

I blink. Isn't this obvious? "To steal a baby doesn't damage the baby's reality. It just grows up somewhere else, with some other people. But all real people of World share the same reality, and anyway after the transition, the child will rejoin its blood ancestors. Baby stealing is wrong, of course, but it isn't a really serious crime."

"And make false coins?"

"The same. False, true—coins are still shared."

He coughs again, this time much harder. I wait. Finally he says, "So when I steal your bicycle, I not violate shared reality too much, because bicycle still somewhere with people of World."

"Of course."

"But when I steal bicycle, I violate shared reality a little?"

"Yes." After a minute I add, "Because the bicycle is, after all, *mine*. You . . . made my reality shift a little without sharing the decision with me." I peer at him; how can all this not be obvious to such an intelligent man?

He says, "You are too trusting for be informer, Pek Bengarin."

I feel my throat swell with indignation. I am a *very good* informer. Haven't I just bound this Terran to me with a private shared reality in order to create an exchange of information? I am about to demand his share of the bargain when he says abruptly, "So why you kill your sister?"

Two of Pek Fakar's people swagger past. They carry the new guns. Across the courtyard a Faller turns slowly to look at them, and even I can read fear on that alien face.

I say, as evenly as I can manage, "I fell prey to an illusion. I thought that Ano was copulating with my lover. She was younger, more intelligent, prettier. I am not very pretty, as you can see. I didn't share the reality with her, or him, and my illusion grew. Finally it exploded in my head, and I . . . did it." I am breathing hard, and Pek Fakar's people look blurry.

"You remember clear Ano's murder?"

I turn to him in astonishment. "How could I forget it?"

"You cannot. You cannot because of memory-building pro-teenz. Memory is strong in your brain. Memory-building pro-teenz are strong in your brain. Scientific research on World children for discover what is structure of pro-teenz, where is pro-teenz, how pro-teenz work. But we discover different thing instead."

"What different thing?" I say, but Pek Walters only shakes his head and begins coughing again. I wonder if the coughing spell is an excuse to violate our bargain. He is, after all, unreal.

Pek Fakar's people have gone inside the prison. The Faller slumps against the far wall. They have not shot him. For this moment, at least, he is not entering the second stage of his perpetual death.

But beside me, Pek Walters coughs blood.

He is dying. I am sure of it, although of course no World healer comes to him. He is dead anyway. Also, his fellow Terrans keep away, looking fearful, which makes me wonder if his disease is catching. This leaves only me. I walk him to his cell, and then wonder why I can't just stay when the door closes. No one will check. Or, if they do, will care. And this may be my last chance to gain the needed information, before either Pek Walters is coffined or Pek Fakar orders me away from him because he is too weak to watch over my supposed blood sickness.

His body has become very hot. During the long night he tosses on his bunk, muttering in his own language, and sometimes those strange alien eyes roll in their sockets. But other times he is clearer, and he looks at me as if he recognizes who I am. Those times, I question him. But the lucid times and unlucid ones blur together. His mind is no longer his own.

"Pek Walters. Where are the memory experiments being conducted? In what place?"

"Memory . . . memories . . ." More in his own language. It has the cadences of poetry.

"Pek Walters. In what place are the memory experiments being done?"

"At Rafkit Sarloe," he says, which makes no sense. Rafkit Sarloe is the government center, where no one lives. It is not large. People flow in every day, running the Sections, and out to their villages again at night. There is no square measure of Rafkit Sarloe that is not constantly shared physical reality.

He coughs, more bloody spume, and his eyes roll in his head. I make him sip some water. "Pek Walters. In what place are the memory experiments being done?"

"At Rafkit Sarloe. In the Cloud. At Aulit Prison."

It goes on and on like that. And in the early morning, Pek Walters dies.

There is one moment of greater clarity, somewhere near the end. He looks at me, out of his old, ravaged face gone gaunt with his transition. The disturbing look is back in his eyes, sad and kind, not a look for the unreal to wear. It is too much sharing. He says, so low I must bend over him to hear, "Sick brain talks to itself. You not kill your sister."

"Hush, don't try to talk . . ."

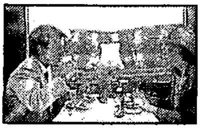
"Find . . . Brifjis. Maldon Pek Brifjis, in Rafkit Haddon. Find . . ." He relapses again into fever.

A few moments after he dies, the armored guards enter the cell, wheel-

Ride The ORIENT EXPRESS

An Incredible Video Journey

The Greatest Train Ride Ever Filmed!

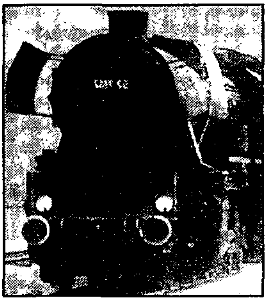


Climb aboard the world's most intriguing train and enjoy the travel adventure of a lifetime. The Orient Express, now restored to its original splendor, takes you on a glorious five-day tour which sweeps across Europe and ends at the fabled city of Istanbul.

Enjoy Marvelous Panoramas
Magnificent mountains, rivers, the delightful Vienna Woods... Relax and enjoy a marvelous panorama as the great blue train hurtles across an ever-changing landscape. Imagine your seat mate is a famous passenger of yesteryear-King Leopold perhaps, or Toscanini or Agatha Christie. Narrated and photographed by film maker Kathleen Dusek, this unique video evokes the charm of a fascinating bygone era.

The Ultimate In Luxury
Now a priceless museum piece, the Orient Express makes its historic run only twice a year. What a privilege to be aboard-to experience the world-class meals, the meticulous service, and the warmth of new-found friendships. Watch as the train is prepared for journey, and as it is pulled over the mountains by antique steam engines... An unforgettable delight for train buffs.

Great Historic Cities
Savor the wonders of Paris, Munich, Salzurg, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest, and exotic Istanbul. This trip follows the route of the original run in 1886. But it lasts 5 days instead of the customary 73 hours, allowing time for some brief, fascinating stop-overs. Enjoy a sumptuous champagne banquet, stroll by Dracula's castle, and much more. VHS; 60 minutes.
Money-back guarantee.



You Can Experience the Legendary "Train of Kings" every day... On a 1,700 mile trip from Paris to Istanbul which runs only twice a year!

Abigail's Treasures, Dept. 106AS
Box 2957802, Myrtle Beach, SC 29578-7802

Yes! It sounds Great- I'd love to audition the **Orient Express** Video(s) (Item #W508) on 30-day money back guarantee.

☐ Mr ☐ Mrs. ☐ Ms.

Name ____________________

Address ____________________

City ____________________

State __________ Zip __________

☐ One Video for only $19.95 plus $3.95 ship. & hdlg. Total $23.90
☐ Great Gift Ideas! Two for only $38.00 plus $4.95 ship. & hdlg. Total $42.95

Charge to my ☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard

Acct.# ________________ Exp. Date ________

Enclosed is $________ (NJ residents please add sales tax.)
Please make check/M.O. payable to Abigail's Treasures
To help process order, you may wish to include your daytime phone number.

(______) ________________

Fulfillment G&C Associates Please allow up to 4-6 weeks for delivery ing the coffin full of bondage chemicals. With them is the priest. I want to say, *Wait, he is a good man, he doesn't deserve perpetual death*—but of course I do not. I am astonished at myself for even thinking it. A guard edges me into the corridor and the door closes.

That same day, I am sent away from Aulit Prison.

"Tell me again. Everything," Pek Brimmidin says.

Pek Brimmidin is just the same: stocky, yellowing, slightly stooped. His cluttered office is just the same. Food dishes, papers, overelaborated sculptures. I stare hungrily at the ugly things. I hadn't realized how much I'd longed, in prison, for the natural sight of curves. I keep my eyes on the sculptures, partly to hold back my question until the proper time to ask it.

"Pek Walter's said he would tell me everything about the experiments that are, yes, going on with World children. In the name of science. But all he had time to tell me was that the experiments involve 'memory-building pro-teenz,' which are tiny pieces of food from which the brain constructs memory. He also said the experiments were going on in Rafkit Sarloe and Aulit Prison."

"And that is all, Pek Bengarin?"

"That is all."

Pek Brimmidin nods curtly. He is trying to appear dangerous, to scare out of me any piece of information I might have forgotten. But Frablit Pek Brimmidin can't appear dangerous to me. I have seen the real thing.

Pek Brimmidin has not changed. But I have.

I ask my question. "I have brought to you all the information I could obtain before the Terran died. Is it sufficient to release me and Ano?"

He runs a hand through his neck fur. "I'm sorry I can't answer that, Pek. I will need to consult my superiors. But I promise to send you word as soon as I can."

"Thank you," I say, and lower my eyes. *You are too trusting for be informer, Pek Bengarin.*

Why didn't I tell Frablit Pek Brimmidin the rest of it, about "Maldon Pek Brifjis" and "Rafkit Haddon" and not really killing my sister? Because it is most likely nonsense, the ravings of a fevered brain. Because this "Maldon Pek Brifjis" might be an innocent World man, who does not deserve trouble brought to him by an unreal alien. Because Pek Walters's words were personal, addressed to me alone, on his deathbed. Because I do not want to discuss Ano with Pek Brimmidin's superiors one more useless painful time.

Because, despite myself, I trust Carryl Pek Walters.

"You may go," Pek Brimmidin says, and I ride my bicycle along the dusty road home.

* * *

I make a bargain with Ano's corpse, still lying in curled-finger grace on the bed across from mine. Her beautiful brown hair floats in the chemicals of the coffin. I used to covet that hair desperately, when we were very young. Once I even cut it all off while she slept. But other times I would weave it for her, or braid it with flowers. She was so pretty. At one point, when she was still a child, she wore eight bid rings, one on each finger. Two of the bids were in negotiation between the boys' fathers and ours. Although older, I have never had a single bid.

Did I murder her?

My bargain with her corpse is this: If the Reality & Atonement Section releases me and Ano because of my work in Aulit Prison, I will seek no further. Ano will be free to join our ancestors; I will be fully real. It will no longer matter whether or not I killed my sister, because both of us will again be sharing in the same reality as if I had not. But if Reality & Atonement holds me unreal still longer, after all I have given them, I will try to find this "Maldon Pek Brifjis."

I say none of this aloud. The guards at Aulit Prison knew immediately when Pek Walters died, inside a closed and windowless room. They could be watching me here, now. World has no devices to do this, but how did Pek Walters know so much about a World man working with a Terran science experiment? Somewhere there are World people and Terrans in partnership. Terrans, as everyone knows, have all sorts of listening devices we do not.

I kiss Ano's coffin. I don't say it aloud, but I hope desperately that Reality & Atonement releases us. I want to return to shared reality, to the daily warmth and sweetness of belonging, now and forever, to the living and dead of World. I do not want to be an informer anymore.

Not for anyone, even myself.

The message comes three days later. The afternoon is warm and I sit outside on my stone bench, watching my neighbor's milkbeasts eye her sturdily fenced flowerbeds. She has new flowers that I don't recognize, with blooms that are entrancing but somehow foreign—could they be Terran? It doesn't seem likely. During my time in Aulit Prison, more people seem to have made up their minds that the Terrans are unreal. I have heard more mutterings, more anger against those who buy from alien traders.

Frablit Pek Brimmidin himself brings the letter from Reality & Atonement, laboring up the road on his ancient bicycle. He has removed his uniform, so as not to embarrass me in front of my neighbors. I watch him ride up, his neck fur damp with unaccustomed exertion, his gray eyes abashed, and I know already what the sealed message must say. Pek Brimmidin is too kind for his job. That is why he is only a low-level messenger boy all the time, not just today.

These are things I never saw before.

You are too trusting for be informer, Pek Bengarin.

"Thank you, Pek Brimmidin," I say. "Would you like a glass of water? Or pel?"

"No, thank you, Pek," he says. He does not meet my eyes. He waves to my other neighbor, fetching water from the village well, and fumbles meaninglessly with the handle of his bicycle. "I can't stay."

"Then ride safely," I say, and go back in my house. I stand beside Ano and break the seal on the government letter. After I read it, I gaze at her a long time. So beautiful, so sweet-natured. So loved.

Then I start to clean. I scrub every inch of my house, for hours and hours, climbing on a ladder to wash the ceiling, sloshing thick soapsuds in the cracks, scrubbing every surface of every object and carrying the more intricately shaped outside into the sun to dry. Despite my most intense scrutiny, I find nothing that I can imagine being a listening device. Nothing that looks alien, nothing unreal.

But I no longer know what is real.

Only Bata is up; the other moons have not risen. The sky is clear and starry, the air cool. I wheel my bicycle inside and try to remember everything I need.

Whatever kind of glass Ano's coffin is made of, it is very tough. I have to swing my garden shovel three times, each time with all my strength, before I can break it. On the third blow the glass cracks, then falls leisurely apart into large pieces that bounce slightly when they hit the floor. Chemicals cascade off the bed, a waterfall of clear liquid that smells only slightly acrid.

In my high boots I wade close to the bed and throw containers of water over Ano to wash off chemical residue. The containers are waiting in a neat row by the wall, everything from my largest wash basin to the kitchen bowls. Ano smiles sweetly.

I reach onto the soggy bed and lift her clear.

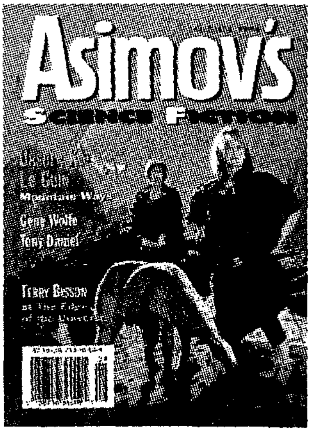
In the kitchen, I lay her body—limp, soft-limbed—on the floor and strip off her chemical-soaked clothing. I dry her, move her to the waiting blanket, take a last look, and wrap her tightly. The bundle of her and the shovel balances across the handles of my bicycle. I pull off my boots and open the door.

The night smells of my neighbor's foreign flowers. Ano seems weightless. I feel as if I can ride for hours. And I do.

I bury her, weighted with stones, in marshy ground well off a deserted road. The wet dirt will speed the decay, and it is easy to cover the grave with reeds and toglif branches. When I've finished, I bury my clothes and dress in clean ones in my pack. Another few hours of riding and I can find an inn to sleep in. Or a field, if need be.

ENTER ANOTHER DIMENSION

Explore worlds of imagination
with stories by Gregory Benford,
Robert Silverberg, and Connie Willis.


Asimov's
Science Fiction
Ursula K. Le Guin
Mountain Ways
Gene Wolfe
Tony Daniel
Terry Bisson

Subscribe today and enjoy 10
engaging issues of 160 pages and
one double issue of more than
280 pages delivered direct to your door!

ASIMOV'S,
1-800-333-4108
P.O. BOX 5130, HARLAN, IA 51593

☐ Send me 2 years (24 issues) of ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION for $49.97. I save more than 25% off the regular price!

☐ Send me 1 year (12 issues) of ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION for $27.97. I save more than 20% off the regular price!

☐ My payment is enclosed

☐ Bill me

NAME ____________________

ADDRESS ____________________

CITY ____________ STATE ________ ZIP ________

Outside U.S.A.: Add $5 per year for shipping & handling. (U.S. funds only, payable with order.)
Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. We publish a double issue in October/November, which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

HA653

The morning dawns pearly, with three moons in the sky. Everywhere I ride are flowers, first wild and then cultivated. Although exhausted, I sing softly to the curving blooms, to the sky, to the pale moonlit road. Ano is real, and free.

Go sweetly, sweet sister, to our waiting ancestors.

Two days later I reach Rafkit Haddon.

It is an old city, sloping down the side of a mountain to the sea. The homes of the rich either stand on the shore or perch on the mountain, looking in both cases like rounded great white birds. In between lie a jumble of houses, market squares, government buildings, inns, pel shops, slums, and parks, the latter with magnificent old trees and shabby old shrines. The manufacturing shops and warehouses lie to the north, with the docks.

I have experience in finding people. I start with Rituals & Processions. The clerk behind the counter, a pre-initiate of the priesthood, is young and eager to help. "Yes?"

"I am Ajma Pek Goranalit, attached to the household of Menanlin. I have been sent to inquire about the ritual activity of a citizen, Maldon Pek Brifjis. Can you help me?"

"Of course," she beams. An inquiry about ritual activity is never written; discretion is necessary when a great house is considering honoring a citizen by allowing him to honor their ancestors. A person so chosen gains great prestige—and considerable material wealth. I picked the name "Menanlin" after an hour's judicious listening in a crowded pel shop. The family is old, numerous, and discreet.

"Let me see," she says, browsing among her public records. "Brifjis . . . Brifjis . . . it's a common name, of course . . . which citizen, Pek?"

"Maldon."

"Oh, yes . . . here. He paid for two musical tributes to his ancestors last year, made a donation to the Rafkit Haddon Priest House . . . Oh! And he was chosen to honor the ancestors of the house of Choulalait!"

She sounds awe-struck. I nod. "We know about that, of course. But is there anything else?"

"No, I don't think so . . . wait. He paid for a charity tribute for the ancestors of his clu merchant, Lam Pek Flanoe, a poor man. Quite a lavish tribute, too. Music, and three priests."

"Kind," I said.

"Very! Three priests!" Her young eyes shine. "Isn't it wonderful how many truly kind people share reality?"

"Yes," I say. "It is."

I find the clu merchant by the simple method of asking for him in several market squares. Sales of all fuels are of course slow in the summer; the young relatives left in charge of the clu stalls are happy to chat with strangers. Lam Pek Flanoe lives in a run-down neighborhood just behind the great houses by the sea. The neighborhood is home to servants and merchants who provide for the rich. Four more glasses of pel in three more pel shops, and I know that Maldon Pek Brifjis is currently a guest in the home of a rich widow. I know the widow's address. I know that Pek Brifjis is a healer.

A healer.

Sick brain talks to itself. You not kill your sister.

I am dizzy from four glasses of pel. Enough. I find an inn, the kind where no one asks questions, and sleep without the shared reality of dreams.

It takes me a day, disguised as a street cleaner, to decide which of the men coming and going from the rich widow's house is Pek Brifjis. Then I spend three days following him, in various guises. He goes a lot of places and talks to a lot of people, but none of them seem unusual for a rich healer with a personal pleasure in collecting antique water carafes. On the fourth day I look for a good opportunity to approach him, but this turns out to be unnecessary.

"Pek," a man says to me as I loiter, dressed as a vendor of sweet flatbreads, outside the baths on Elindel Street. I have stolen the sweets before dawn from the open kitchen of a bake shop. I know at once that the man approaching me is a bodyguard, and that he is very good. It's in the way he walks, looks at me, places his hand on my arm. He is also very handsome, but that thought barely registers. Handsome men are never for such as me. They are for Ano.

Were for Ano.

"Come with me, please," the bodyguard says, and I don't argue. He leads me to the back of the baths, through a private entrance, to a small room apparently used for private grooming of some sort. The only furniture is two small stone tables. He checks me, expertly but gently, for weapons, looking even in my mouth. Satisfied, he indicates where I am to stand, and opens a second door.

Maldon Pek Brifjis enters, wrapped in a bathing robe of rich imported cloth. He is younger than Carryl Walters, a vigorous man in a vigorous prime. His eyes are striking, a deep purple with long gold lines radiating from their centers. He says immediately, "Why have you been following me for three days?"

"Someone told me to," I say. I have nothing to lose by an honest shared reality, although I still don't fully believe I have anything to gain.

"Who? You may say anything in front of my guard."

"Carryl Pek Walters."

The purple eyes deepen even more. "Pek Walters is dead."

"Yes," I say. "Perpetually. I was with him when he entered the second stage of death."

"And where was that?" He is testing me.

"In Aulit Prison. His last words instructed me to find you. To . . . ask you something."

"What do you wish to ask me?"

"Not what I thought I would ask," I say, and realize that I have made the decision to tell him everything. Until I saw him up close, I wasn't completely sure what I would do. I can no longer share reality with World, not even if I went to Frablit Pek Brimmidin with exactly the knowledge he wants about the scientific experiments on children. That would not atone for releasing Ano before the Section agreed. And Pek Brimmidin is only a messenger, anyway. No, less than a messenger: a tool, like a garden shovel, or a bicycle. He does not share the reality of his users. He only thinks he does.

As I had thought I did.

I say, "I want to know if I killed my sister. Pek Walters said I did not. He said 'sick brain talks to itself,' and that I had not killed Ano. And to ask *you*. Did I kill my sister?"

Pek Brifjis sits down on one of the stone tables. "I don't know," he says, and I see his neck fur quiver. "Perhaps you did. Perhaps you did not."

"How can I discover which?"

"You cannot."

"Ever?"

"Ever." And then, "I am sorry."

Dizziness takes me. The "low blood pressure." The next thing I know, I lie on the floor of the small room, with Pek Brifjis's fingers on my elbow pulse. I struggle to sit up.

"No, wait," he says. "Wait a moment. Have you eaten today?"

"Yes."

"Well, wait a moment anyway. I need to think."

He does, the purple eyes turning inward, his fingers absently pressing the inside of my elbow. Finally he says, "You are an informer. That's why you were released from Aulit Prison after Pek Walters died. You inform for the government."

I don't answer. It no longer matters.

"But you have left informing. Because of what Pek Walters told you. Because he told you that the skits-oh-free-nia experiments might have . . . no. It can't be."

He too has used a word I don't know. It sounds Terran. Again I struggle to sit up, to leave. There is no hope for me here. This healer can tell me nothing.

He pushes me back down on the floor and says swiftly, "When did your sister die?" His eyes have changed once again; the long golden flecks are brighter, radiating from the center like glowing spokes. "Please, Pek, this is immensely important. To both of us."

TRAVEL THROUGH THE UNIVERSE WITH

ANALOG

Each issue of Analog Science Fiction and Fact blazes the way to bold new discoveries. The stories in Analog begin with a scientific base that stretches beyond your imagination. Start your subscription today and travel to distant places and times where fiction becomes fact.

Subscribe today
and save off the
newsstand price!

☐ 2 years (24 issues) for $49.97. (I save $18.00!)
☐ 1 year (12 issues) for $27.97. (I save $6.00!)
☐ Payment enclosed
☐ Please bill me

Name ______________________
Address ______________________
City ______________________
State ____________ Zip ____________

MAIL TO

ANALOG
PO Box 5133
Harlan, IA 51593
or call toll-free
1-800-333-4561

Outside U.S.A.: Add $5 per year for shipping & handling. (U.S. funds only, payment with order). Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of your first issue. We publish a double issue in July/August, which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

HA638

"Two years ago, and 152 days."

"Where? In what city?"

"Village. Our village. Gofkit Ilo."

"Yes," he says. "*Yes*. Tell me everything you remember of her death. Everything."

This time I push him aside and sit up. Blood rushes from my head, but anger overcomes the dizziness. "I will tell you nothing. Who do you people think you are, ancestors? To tell me I killed Ano, then tell me I didn't, then say you don't know—to destroy the hope of atonement I had as an informer, then to tell me there is no other hope—no, there might be hope—no, there's *not*—how can you live with yourself? How can you twist people's brains away from shared reality and offer *nothing to replace it!*" I am screaming. The bodyguard glances at the door. I don't care; I go on screaming.

"You are doing experiments on children, wrecking their reality as you have wrecked mine! You are a murderer—" But I don't get to scream all that. Maybe I don't get to scream any of it. For a needle slides into my elbow, at the inner pulse where Maldon Brifjis has been holding it, and the room slides away as easily as Ano into her grave.

A bed, soft and silky, beneath me. Rich wall hangings. The room is very warm. A scented breeze whispers across my bare stomach. Bare? I sit up and discover I am dressed in the gauzy skirt, skimpy bandeau, and flirting veil of a prostitute.

At my first movement, Pek Brifjis crosses from the fireplace to my bed. "Pek. This room does not allow sound to escape. Do not resume screaming. Do you understand?"

I nod. His bodyguard stands across the room. I pull the flirting veil from my face.

"I am sorry about that," Pek Brifjis says. "It was necessary to dress you in a way that accounts for a bodyguard carrying a drugged woman into a private home without raising questions."

A private home. I guess that this is the rich widow's house by the sea. A room that does not allow sound to escape. A needle unlike ours: sharp and sure. Brain experiments. "Skits-oh-free-nia."

I say, "You work with the Terrans."

"No," he says. "I do not."

"But Pek Walters . . ." It doesn't matter. "What are you going to do with me?"

He says, "I am going to offer you a trade."

"What sort of trade?"

"Information in return for your freedom."

And he says he does not work with Terrans. I say, "What use is freedom to me?" although of course I don't expect him to understand that. I can never be free.

"Not that kind of freedom," he says. "I won't just let you go from this room. I will let you rejoin your ancestors, and Ano."

I gape at him.

"Yes, Pek. I will kill you and bury you myself, where your body can decay."

"You would violate shared reality like that? For *me?*"

His purple eyes deepen again. For a moment, something in those eyes looks almost like Pek Walters's blue ones. "Please understand. I think there is a strong chance you did not kill Ano. Your village was one where . . . subjects were used for experimentation. I think that is the true shared reality here."

I say nothing. A little of his assurance disappears. "Or so I believe. Will you agree to the trade?"

"Perhaps," I say. Will he actually do what he promises? I can't be sure. But there is no other way for me. I cannot hide from the government all the years until I die. I am too young. And when they find me, they will send me back to Aulit, and when I die there they will put me in a coffin of preservative chemicals . . .

I would never see Ano again.

The healer watches me closely. Again I see the Pek Walters look in his eyes: sadness and pity.

"Perhaps I will agree to the trade," I say, and wait for him to speak again about the night Ano died. But instead he says, "I want to show you something."

He nods at the bodyguard who leaves the room, returning a few moments later. By the hand he leads a child, a little girl, clean and well-dressed. One look makes my neck fur bristle. The girl's eyes are flat and unseeing. She mutters to herself. I offer a quick appeal for protection to my ancestors. The girl is unreal, without the capacity to perceive shared reality, even though she is well over the age of reason. She is not human. She should have been destroyed.

"This is Ori," Pek Brifjis says. The girl suddenly laughs, a wild demented laugh, and peers at something only she can see.

"Why is it here?" I listen to the harshness in my own voice.

"Ori was born real. She was made this way by the scientific brain experiments of the government."

"Of the government! That is a lie!"

"Is it? Do you still, Pek, have such trust in your government?"

"No, but . . ." To make me continue to earn Ano's freedom, even after I had met their terms . . . to lie to Pek Brimmidin . . . those offenses against shared reality are one thing. The destruction of a real person's physical body, as I had done with Ano's (had I?) is another, far far worse. To destroy a *mind,* the instrument of perceiving shared reality . . . Pek Brifjis lies.

He says, "Pek, tell me about the night Ano died."

"Tell me about this . . . thing!"

"All right." He sits down in a chair beside my luxurious bed. The thing wanders around the room, muttering. It seems unable to stay still.

"She was born Ori Malfisit, in a small village in the far north—"

"What village?" I need desperately to see if he falters on details.

He does not. "Gofkit Ramloe. Of real parents, simple people, an old and established family. At six years old, Ori was playing in the forest with some other children when she disappeared. The other children said they heard something thrashing toward the marshes. The family decided she had been carried off by a wild kilfreit—there are still some left, you know, that far north—and held a procession in honor of Ori's joining their ancestors.

"But that's not what happened to Ori. She was stolen by two men, unreal prisoners promised atonement and restoration to full reality, just as you were. Ori was carried off to Rafkit Sarloe, with eight other children from all over World. There they were given to the Terrans, who were told that they were orphans who could be used for experiments. The experiments were ones that would not hurt or damage the children in any way."

I look at Ori, now tearing a table scarf into shreds and muttering. Her empty eyes turn to mine, and I have to look away.

"This part is difficult," Pek Brifjis says. "Listen hard, Pek. The Terrans truly did not hurt the children. They put ee-lek-trodes on their heads . . . you don't know what that means. They found ways to see which parts of their brains worked the same as Terran brains and which did not. They used a number of tests and machines and drugs. None of it hurt the children, who lived at the Terran scientific compound and were cared for by World childwatchers. At first the children missed their parents, but they were young, and after a while they were happy."

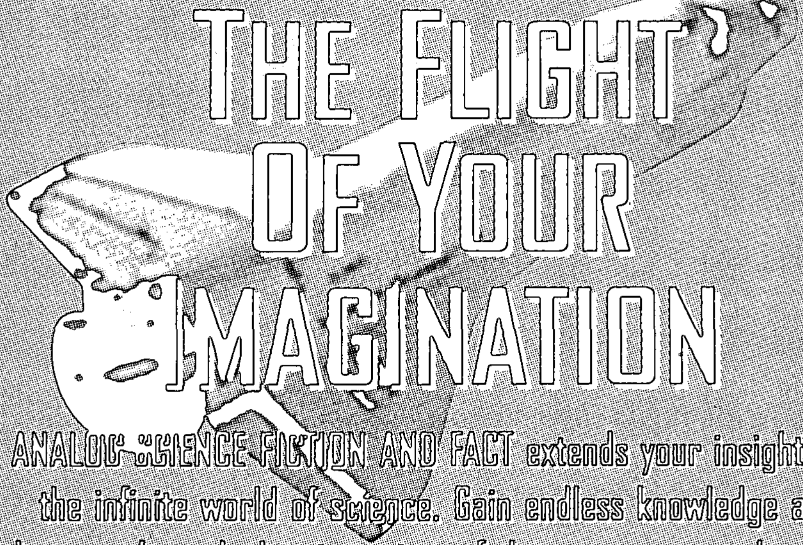
I glance again at Ori. The unreal, not sharing in common reality, are isolated and therefore dangerous. A person with no world in common with others will violate those others as easily as cutting flowers. Under such conditions, pleasure is possible, but not happiness.

Pek Brifjis runs his hand through his neck fur. "The Terrans worked with World healers, of course, teaching them. It was the usual trade, only this time we received the information and they the physical reality: children and watchers. There was no other way World could permit Terrans to handle our children. Our healers were there every moment."

He looks at me. I say, "Yes," just because something must be said.

"Do you know, Pek, what it is like to realize you have lived your whole life according to beliefs that are not true?"

"No!" I say, so loudly that Ori looks up with her mad, unreal gaze. She smiles. I don't know why I spoke so loud. What Pek Brifjis said has nothing to do with me. Nothing at all.



INSPIRE THE FLIGHT OF YOUR IMAGINATION

ANALOG SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT extends your insight into the infinite world of science. Gain endless knowledge and pleasure through the viewpoints of the most respected authors in the science field. You'll find there are no limits to where your scientific imagination will take you!

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Receive 2 years (24 issues) for only $49.97
or for $27.97 receive 1 year (12 issues).

Call toll free
1-800-333-4561

OR

mail your order to:
ANALOG
PO Box 5133, Harlan, IA 51593

Outside U.S.A.: Add $5 per year for shipping & handling. (U.S. funds only, payment with order.) Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of your first issue. We publish a double issue in July/August, which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

HA646

"Well, Pek Walters knew. He realized that the experiments he participated in, harmless to the subjects and in aid of biological understanding of species differences, were being used for something else. The roots of skits-oh-free-nia, misfiring brain sir-kits—" He is off on a long explanation that means nothing to me. Too many Terran words, too much strangeness. Pek Brifjis is no longer talking to me. He is talking to himself, in some sort of pain I don't understand.

Suddenly the purple eyes snap back to mine. "What all that means, Pek, is that a few of the healers—our own healers, from World—found out how to manipulate the Terran science. They took it and used it to put into minds memories that did not happen."

"Not possible!"

"It is possible. The brain is made very excited, with Terran devices, while the false memory is recited over and over. Then different parts of the brain are made to . . . to recirculate memories and emotions over and over. Like water recirculated through mill races. The water gets all scrambled together. . . . No. Think of it this way: different parts of the brain send signals to each other. The signals are forced to loop together, and every loop makes the unreal memories stronger. It is apparently in common use on Terra, although tightly controlled."

Sick brain talks to itself.

"But—"

"There are no objections possible, Pek. It is real. It happened. It happened to Ori. The World scientists made her brain remember things that had not happened. Small things, at first. That worked. When they tried larger memories, something went wrong. It left her like this. They were still learning; that was five years ago. They got better, much better. Good enough to experiment on adult subjects who could then be returned to shared reality."

"One can't plant memories like flowers, or uproot them like weeds!"

"These people could. And did."

"But—*why?*"

"Because the World healers who did this—and they were only a few—saw a different reality."

"I don't—"

"They saw the Terrans able to do everything. Make better machines than we can, from windmills to bicycles. Fly to the stars. Cure disease. Control nature. Many World people are afraid of Terrans, Pek. And of Fallers and Huhuhubs. Because their reality is superior to ours."

"There is only one common reality," I said. "The Terrans just know more about it than we do!"

"Perhaps. But Terran knowledge makes people uneasy. And afraid. And jealous."

Jealous. Ano saying to me in the kitchen, with Bata and Cap bright at *the window, "I will too go out tonight to see him! You can't stop me! You're just jealous, a jealous ugly shriveled thing that not even your lover wants, so you don't wish me to have any—" And the red flood swamping my brain, the kitchen knife, the blood—*

"Pek?" the healer says. "Pek?"

"I'm . . . all right. The jealous healers, they hurt their own people, World people, for revenge on the Terrans—that makes no sense!"

"The healers acted with great sorrow. They knew what they were doing to people. But they needed to perfect the technique of inducing controlled skits-oh-free-nia . . . they *needed* to do it. To make people angry at Terrans. Angry enough to forget the attractive trade goods and rise up against the aliens. To cause war. The healers are mistaken, Pek. We have not had a war on World in a thousand years; our people cannot understand how hard the Terrans would strike back. But you must understand: the outlaw scientists thought they were doing the right thing. They thought they were creating anger in order to save World.

"And another thing—with the help of the government, they were careful not to make any World man or woman permanently unreal. The adults manipulated into murder were all offered atonement as informers. The children are all cared for. The mistakes, like Ori, will be allowed to decay someday, to return to her ancestors. I will see to that myself."

Ori tears the last of the scarf into pieces, smiling horribly, her flat eyes empty. What unreal memories fill her head?

I say bitterly, "Doing the right thing . . . letting me believe I killed my sister!"

"When you rejoin your ancestors, you will find it isn't so. And the means of rejoining them was made available to you: the completion of your informing atonement."

But now that atonement never will be completed. I stole Ano and buried her without Section consent. Maldon Brifjis, of course, does not know this.

Through my pain and anger I blurt, "And what of *you,* Pek Brifjis? You work with these criminal healers, aiding them in emptying children like Ori of reality—"

"I don't work with them. I thought you were smarter, Pek. I work against them. And so did Carryl Walters, which is why he died in Aulit Prison."

"Against them?"

"Many of us do. Carryl Walters among them. He was an informer. And my friend."

Neither of us says anything. Pek Brifjis stares into the fire. I stare at Ori, who has begun to grimace horribly. She squats on an intricately woven curved rug that looks very old. A reek suddenly fills the room. Ori does not share with the rest of us the reality of piss closets. She throws back her head and laughs, a horrible sound like splintering metal.

"Take her away," Pek Brifjis says wearily to the guard, who looks unhappy. "I'll clean up here." To me he adds, "We can't allow any servants in here with you."

The guard leads away the grimacing child. Pek Brifjis kneels and scrubs at the rug with chimney rags dipped in water from my carafe. I remember that he collects antique water carafes. What a long way that must seem from scrubbing shit, from Ori, from Carryl Walters coughing out his lungs in Aulit Prison, among aliens.

"Pek Brifjis—did I kill my sister?"

He looks up. There is shit on his hands. "There is no way to be absolutely sure. It is possible you were one of the experiment subjects from your village. You would have been drugged in your house, to awake with your sister murdered and your mind altered."

I say, more quietly than I have said anything else in this room, "You will really kill me, let me decay, and enable me to rejoin my ancestors?"

Pek Brifjis stands and wipes the shit from his hands. "I will."

"But what will you do if I refuse? If instead I ask to return home?"

"If you do that, the government will arrest you and once more promise you atonement—if you inform on those of us working to oppose them."

"Not if I go first to whatever part of the government is truly working to end the experiments. Surely you aren't saying the *entire* government is doing this . . . thing."

"Of course not. But do you know for certain which Sections, and which officials in those Sections, wish for war with the Terrans, and which do not? *We* can't be sure. How can you?"

Frablit Pek Brimmidin is innocent, I think. But the thought is useless. Pek Brimmidin is innocent, but powerless.

It tears my soul to think that the two might be the same thing.

Pek Brifjis rubs at the damp carpet with the toe of his boot. He puts the rags in a lidded jar and washes his hands at the washstand. A faint stench still hangs in the air. He comes to stand beside my bed.

"Is that what you want, Uli Pek Bengarin? That I let you leave this house, not knowing what you will do, whom you will inform on? That I endanger everything we have done in order to convince you of its truth?"

"Or you can kill me and let me rejoin my ancestors. Which is what you think I will choose, isn't it? That choice would let you keep faith with the reality you have decided is true, and still keep yourself secret from the criminals. Killing me would be easiest for you. But only if I consent to my murder. Otherwise, you will violate even the reality you have decided to perceive."

He stares down at me, a muscular man with beautiful purple eyes. A healer who would kill. A patriot defying his government to prevent a violent war. A sinner who does all he can to minimize his sin and keep it from denying him the chance to rejoin his own ancestors. A believer in shared reality who is trying to bend the reality without breaking the belief.

I keep quiet. The silence stretches on. Finally it is Pek Brifjis that breaks it. "I wish Carryl Walters had never sent you to me."

"But he did. And I choose to return to my village. Will you let me go, or keep me prisoner here, or murder me without my consent?"

"Damn you," he says, and I recognize the word as one Carryl Walters used, about the unreal souls in Aulit Prison.

"Exactly," I say. "What will you do, Pek? Which of your supposed multiple realities will you choose now?"

It is a hot night, and I cannot sleep.

I lie in my tent on the wide empty plain and listen to the night noises. Rude laughter from the pel tent, where a group of miners drinks far too late at night for men who must bore into hard rock at dawn. Snoring from the tent to my right. Muffled lovemaking from a tent farther down the row, I'm not sure whose. The woman giggles, high and sweet.

I have been a miner for half a year now. After I left the northern village of Gofkit Ramloe, Ori's village, I just kept heading north. Here on the equator, where World harvests its tin and diamonds and pel berries and salt, life is both simpler and less organized. Papers are not necessary. Many of the miners are young, evading their government service for one reason or another. Reasons that must seem valid to them. Here government sections rule weakly, compared to the rule of the mining and farming companies. There are no messengers on Terran bicycles. There is no Terran science. There are no Terrans.

There are shrines, of course, and rituals and processions, and tributes to one's ancestors. But these things actually receive less attention than in the cities, because they are more taken for granted. Do you pay attention to air?

The woman giggles again, and this time I recognize the sound. Awi Pek Crafmal, the young runaway from another island. She is a pretty thing, and a hard worker. Sometimes she reminds me of Ano.

I asked a great many questions in Gofkit Ramloe. *Ori Malfisit,* Pek Brifjis said her name was. *An old and established family.* But I asked and asked, and no such family had ever lived in Gofkit Ramloe. Wherever Ori came from, and however she had been made into that unreal and empty vessel shitting on a rich carpet, she had not started her poor little life in Gofkit Ramloe.

Did Maldon Brifjis know I would discover that, when he released me from the rich widow's house overlooking the sea? He must have. Or maybe, despite knowing I was an informer, he didn't understand that I would actually go to Gofkit Ramloe and check. You can't understand everything.

Sometimes, in the darkest part of the night, I wish I had taken Pek Brifjis's offer to return me to my ancestors.

I work on the rock piles of the mine during the day, among miners who lift sledges and shatter solid stone. They talk, and curse, and revile the Terrans, although few miners have as much as seen one. After work the miners sit in camp and drink pel, lifting huge mugs with dirty hands, and laugh at obscene jokes. They all share the same reality, and it binds them together, in simple and happy strength.

I have strength, too. I have the strength to swing my sledge with the other women, many of whom have the same rough plain looks as I, and who are happy to accept me as one of them. I had the strength to shatter Ano's coffin, and to bury her even when I thought the price to me was perpetual death. I had the strength to follow Carryl Walters's words about the brain experiments and seek Maldon Brifjis. I had the strength to twist Pek Brifjis's divided mind to make him let me go.

But do I have the strength to go where all of that leads me? Do I have the strength to look at Frablit Brimmidin's reality, and Carryl Walters's reality, and Ano's, and Maldon Brifjis's, and Ori's—and try to find the places that match and the places that don't? Do I have the strength to live on, never knowing if I killed my sister, or if I did not? Do I have the strength to doubt everything, and live with doubt, and sort through the millions of separate realities on World, searching for the true pieces of each—assuming that I can even recognize them?

Should anyone have to live like that? In uncertainty, in doubt, in loneliness. Alone in one's mind, in an isolated and unshared reality.

I would like to return to the days when Ano was alive. Or even to the days when I was an informer. To the days when I shared in World's reality, and knew it to be solid beneath me, like the ground itself. To the days when I knew what to think, and so did not have to.

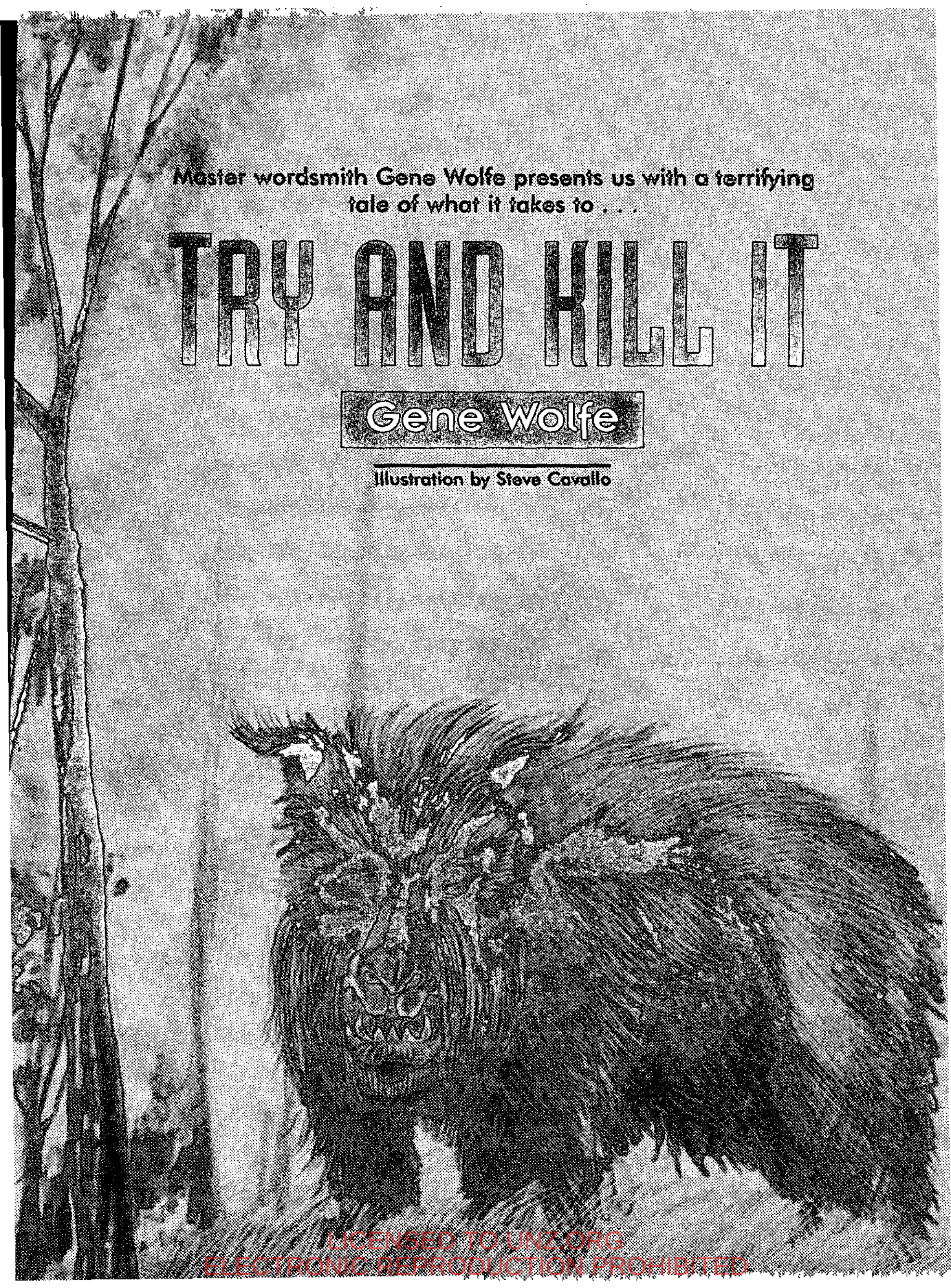
To the days before I became—unwillingly—as terrifyingly real as I am now. ●

THIS NEAT SHEET

What things could be found on this page!
Think of what you might read here, on this neat sheet.
You might pick it up and read what you have wanted
        all your life —
Anything could be here.
An equation — THE equation which would unlock time.
A plan, 1, 2, 3, subhead a, b, c — A plan to put the world in order.
A check — Yes, one could write a good check just on this paper,
        lots of money, for you. (Notice I said "one"; one might
        be very rich!)
A love letter . . . Desiring you, telling you how you are loved.
(Are you?)
A confession, a thriller . . . crime, treason, perversion.
Anything could be here?
Why not?

—James Tiptree, Jr.

From *Neat Sheets: The Poetry of James Tiptree, Jr.* Forthcoming from Tachyon Publications, San Francisco, CA.



Master wordsmith Gene Wolfe presents us with a terrifying tale of what it takes to . . .

TRY AND KILL IT

Gene Wolfe

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

His name was Tom, Tom Hunter. He had gone to bed early the night before and risen at three, having enjoyed six and a half hours sleep, which was about as much as he ever got. His bow and his quiver of broadheads had been in the van already, along with his hunting knife and most of his other stuff. He had put on coffee that perked while he fooled around with the rest, mostly looking for the silver flask Bet had given him on his birthday four years ago, so he could fill it with rock-and-rye. At about the same time the coffee perked, he woke up for real and remembered that he'd filled it the night before and put it in a hip pocket of his hunting pants.

He'd washed his face again (no shave today), put on the pants, and filled his thermos with fresh hot coffee—light cream, no sugar.

Now here he was, and the sun not up. He got out of the van, shutting the driver's-side door as quietly as he could, switched on his flashlight and got his stuff from in back, shutting that door quietly, too, and making sure the van was locked.

The night wasn't even getting gray, the stars obscured by an overcast and the moon already down. Padding along in crepe-soled boots, he jogged down the little path and turned onto the game trail nobody else knew about. It was possible—not likely, but possible—that his light would spook the deer, though he'd taped over most of the lens and was careful to aim the beam low. Noise would spook them sure, so he moved as quietly as he could, which was not quietly enough to satisfy him.

The tree looked different at night. Alive, somehow. It was a live tree, of course, with green leaves and even little winged seeds early that summer. He had always known it was alive, but it had looked no more alive when he had built his blind on the big limb than the plastic trees that would appear in Wal-Mart in another week or two. It was different now, a placid thing that stood in the night like a huge horse and let him touch it and even climb it using the spikes he had driven into its rough hide in June, not because it liked or was afraid of him, but because it didn't care.

He thought about Rusty then, whether he ought to have taken Rusty hunting, was Rusty too young or what? He had decided no, not this year, not this Saturday which would be today when the sun came up to make a new day. Rusty was too young, would whine at being awakened so early and wake up Bet, who would insist on oatmeal. And it would be seven o'clock before they got into the woods, maybe eight, and the best part of the day wasted.

But he had been wrong, and knew it as he eased into the blind, gripping the familiar handholds. He could have, should have, carried Rusty out to the van and let him sleep a little more on the drive out. Waked him before they got to the woods so he could get dressed, and brought him to the tree so he could feel this, feel it standing here in night waiting for a rider who might not come this year or the next. Who might not come at all but who was worth waiting for in rain and wind and snow, because waiting for the rider (who was certainly not himself, no, never Tom Hunter) was the only worthwhile thing anybody could do. And if Rusty could just once be made to feel that, Rusty would be all right forever, good and decent at the core even if he gave them trouble sometimes or got in trouble with the law, even.

So he should have brought Rusty, and perhaps next year it would be too late. Bow season was only a week, but there would be rifle season after. They could do it next Saturday, maybe.

He stood and took his bow out of the bow case as quietly as he could, then pulled out a broadhead quietly too, nocked it and drew the bow just to satisfy himself (as he had so often before) that there was room enough up here, letting the bowstring go straight again without letting fly. The broadhead's razor-sharp blades gleamed dully in the night, and he realized with a little start that the night was not quite so black as it had been. Soon—very soon, now—the sun would peep above the horizon and bow season would begin officially.

There was talk of having a black-powder season, too, a week for black-powder hunters after regular deer season. It meant he would have to get a black-powder gun, a good one, just as he'd gotten the Ruger Redhawk for handgun season. Learn to load and shoot it before next year, to be safe. If there was overtime this winter, maybe he could, a long Kentucky rifle to get the highest possible velocity out of the feeble propellant. He'd—

A thump. Not exactly loud but not soft either, not near and not far—middle distance and very, very impressive. Impressive enough to spook every deer in the county.

He gnawed his lip as he tried to think what had made it so impressive, why he'd known at once that it was an important and a significant thump—that something big had happened not very far away. Without training in logic or any other science, he was of an analytical turn of mind, getting to the roots of things when he could, and when he couldn't returning to them again and again to paw at the earth and sniff (he smiled to himself) like Dad's coonhound. This one wasn't too hard for him though, not nearly. Not rooted too deep for him at all.

It had been because he'd felt the thump as well as hearing it. It had shaken the ground, if only a little, and the ground had shaken the tree, which might even have acted as an amplifier or a sounding board, like the back of the fiddle he'd built from a kit about the time he met Bet but never learned to play. The old fiddle collecting dust in the basement, not a very good fiddle really though something might be made of it now, stripped and refinished after some sanding and regluing. He was a whole lot more patient these days, a better worker.

A craftsman.

A supervisor had called him a craftsman back in July, and Dean and Juan had kidded him about it; but he had felt at the time that it was the greatest compliment he could ever get or would ever get, and if he died after that it would not really matter—would matter to Bet and Rusty, no doubt, but not to him.

It had worn off a little since. He had come to realize in his analytical way that it didn't really matter much whether the supervisor thought he was a craftsman, or what the supervisor said. What mattered was whether he was; and he had worked more carefully than ever after that, taking no more time than was needed to do the job, but always taking the time to do the job right, fixing any little thing he came across so nobody would have to come back and do it later, and leaving each machine clean and tight, running as much like new as he could make it.

Dad. . . . He hadn't thought of his father much in probably a year, but here he was again. Dad had bought a used pickup and said later that if only the guy who'd sold it had told him what the little scraps of wire in the box under the seat were for it would have saved him a hundred dollars. But he didn't like the kind of fixes you did with little scraps of wire. There was magic in the first drop of oil, and magic in a good, clean oily rag. Out past that it was what you knew and how much you were willing to think, making your mind go like the parts, not just replacing stuff and walking away.

But what had the thump been? What could it have been? Trucks hitting out on the highway?

Trucks hitting out on the highway couldn't possibly have shaken the earth in which this tree stood on a wooded hillside three valleys away; but maybe he had been wrong about that.

An explosion at the plant; but this had been closer, he felt sure. He tried to think whether there was another plant closer, or whether it could have been a truck blowing up; and decided it had not been an explosion at all. More like a tree falling, but that wasn't quite it either.

Now he could see the ground below, and the place where the game trail turned, the place where he would take his shot—twenty-two yards, he had measured it in July. An easy shot for a compound bow as powerful as his, a bow that could send an arrow straight and true a hundred yards easy.

The little wind that had brushed his cheek once or twice in the dark could be seen playing all around now, shaking leaves and stirring the few dead leaves that had already dropped, leaves red and yellow or brown, sometimes with green patches on them, alive in death.

Like Mom. Dad had been old and tired and dead, that was all, dressed up in his coffin in a fashion that would have embarrassed him if he had been alive; but some part of Mom had still been alive, had not given up until they had closed the lid and screwed it down, so that he had half expected to hear her rapping on it when they lowered her into the grave. Although she was dead, of course, and only some small part of her that death had not yet claimed still living in his mind, a green patch that worried about him and Bet and Rusty, and planned to bake more pies, to teach Bet stuff she already knew or did not want to learn, make another quilt with Dora Skinner, because a real cold winter might come someday when he and Bet would be grateful for a nice—

Something was moving away down the slope, down where the little creek barely trickled along the valley. Something bigger than a deer but just about as quiet. Another hunter, probably. Not driving deer toward a partner, because anybody trying to drive deer would make more noise. Just prowling through the woods with his bow, pretty quiet, hoping to get a shot.

It was too bad he wasn't driving, whoever he was, because if he had been the deer might have run up here along the game trail. Probably would, in fact. And then he himself might have gotten a shot if he was quick enough.

No does, he told himself again. No doe season this year, and he wouldn't want to be caught with one—didn't want to bag a doe anyhow. No little spike bucks, either. There were plenty of those every year; but they weren't anything but meat, and Bet could buy meat at the meat counter. Let the little spike bucks grow up a few more years. Six points for him. Eight or ten if he was lucky, but he'd settle for six. A braggin' buck.

He grinned to himself, grinned to the little breeze and the silent wood.

That other hunter was coming nearer now, and he might very well be driving deer even if he didn't mean to. A deer heard better than a man, better even than most dogs. The lone hunter (Tom Hunter pictured a big man, middle-aged, moving quietly) was hunting upwind, which was the way to do it; deer had better noses than lots of dogs, too.

A terrified deer was on the game trail, small hoofs trapdrumming the hard, dry soil. Tom drew his bow, but it made the turn too fast for him to have shot even if he had wanted to, coming straight at his tree for a moment and flashing past—a small doe, scared out of her wits.

He got close to her, Tom thought. Got real close, probably kicked her up. Might have creased her with an arrow then. That would account for it.

He himself had put an arrow completely through a deer two years before, and watched it run away. It had run for more than a quarter mile, and it had taken him nearly two hours to find it, following the blood trail. If the lone hunter climbing the hill was following a similar trail, he would see him soon.

He listened for more, then for anything. This early in the morning, with the sun just rising, the birds ought to be making a fuss, but they were not. Had migration begun already? Even if it had, there should be plenty left.

It was the explosion, no doubt. It had scared—

Just then a jay started talking some distance down the hillside, the loud, hoarse danger-cries that warned all good birds of the presence of a cat or a man. Here he comes, Tom thought.

And then, that does it—that wraps up the morning. I'm not going to get a damn thing. Not even going to get a shot.

He had gotten up at three for this, left the house without breakfast. He returned the arrow to his quiver, put down his bow, and poured himself a cup of coffee, adding a few drops of rock-and-rye.

He sipped, then swallowed greedily, admitting to himself that it tasted great.

He would go home and eat, maybe take a nap. Bet would kid him, but it wouldn't matter because he'd kid himself worse. And before sundown he'd be back in the blind again, and maybe he'd at least get a shot. For a moment he regretted not shooting at the terrified little doe, but he pushed the thought aside. He could have, and he had chosen not to, so no more complaining about not getting a shot.

Maybe he should just go back to the van. He could sleep in the van for a couple of hours, then come back here. That way Rusty could make all the noise he wanted; this was Rusty's day off, too, after all.

He drank again, wiped his mouth on his right sleeve, and considered removing the wrist guard from his left. A wrist guard was there to keep the bowstring from slapping your wrist and to keep your sleeve from fouling the string. If he wasn't going to shoot his bow, why wear it? Although it was just possible that he'd get a shot at something he wanted on the way back to the van.

Or he could stay right here, hang in. The sandwiches he'd carried had been intended as his lunch. Was he going to tote them back to the van after carrying them out here? What would he think of himself—of the way he'd acted—when hunting season was over?

The stainless-steel cup that doubled as the thermos bottle's cap was nearly empty. As he swallowed the last drop, there was a sudden rattle as a deer broke just out of sight. Before he could grab his bow, it had flashed past, a little spike buck.

He picked up his bow and nocked the arrow again.

A minute passed, or an indeterminate time that seemed to him a minute or more; the playful wind carried the faintest possible odor of laundry day, a chemical smell from some factory miles away.

Then it sounded as if a riot were in progress just out of sight, the rocketing roar of a pheasant practically lost among clattering hooves and breaking twigs as an entire herd flushed from a thicket. He drew his bow as the lead doe rounded the turn and made for his tree, mouth open and tongue lolling, covering a good twelve feet with every jump, a big doe sleek and fat with autumn going full out and still picking up speed. Behind her the ruck of the herd, bounding fawns and leaping does, perhaps eight in all, perhaps ten or twelve.

Last of all the buck covering their retreat, muscled like a wrestler and crowned more regally than any king, thick of neck and large of eye, frightened yet still in command of himself if not of his panicky harem. For an instant he halted at the bend, head high, to stare up at the tree-limb blind and the point of the arrow aimed at his heart. His tail twitched; he plunged ahead and was gone.

"God damn!" Tom said under his breath. "God damn, oh, God dammit!" It was inadequate, but what would be adequate? The bow had turned to concrete in his hand, its string sticking to his fingers as though they had been dipped in glue. Buck fever, he told himself. I got buck fever again.

After how many years? He tried to count back to his first hunt with Dad. Sixteen. No, eighteen.

Buck fever.

Yet it had not been. He'd seen buck fever, had experienced it himself. Your hands shook with eagerness, and as often as not you shot too soon. Or you gawked openmouthed instead of raising your gun, or knocked it over when you grabbed for it. His hands had been as steady as ever in his life; he had seen the buck and sighted, had known what to do. Something had stopped him.

Had Dad's ghost returned? Said spare this one, son, and for the rest of your life you'll know he's out there?

No. Tom pushed the thought aside. Only women saw ghosts. Ghosts! Women and nuts. Flakes, and he was no flake, was a rock-solid sober family man and a good bow-hunter. Something in his own mind had stopped him, and not for any silly, sentimental reason. What had it been?

When he rooted it out and held it up, he had to laugh. He had not shot because he might need the arrow—because something awful was coming. But the other hunter was merely a man like himself, and might easily be a man he knew, a man in a hunting cap and a camo shirt, walking along with his bow in his hand and his quiver on his back like anybody else.

Down beyond the bend there was a flash of brown, rich and reddish among the grays and blacks of trunks, the green of leaves. Not a camo shirt. Some kind of a brown shirt, maybe an Army surplus wool shirt, but it hadn't quite seemed like the Army color. A man—

There it was, just passing in back of a bush then gone in the shadows, red-brown with a gray streak and bigger than a pony, bigger than any man, as big as a bull almost but not a bull or a cow or anything like that.

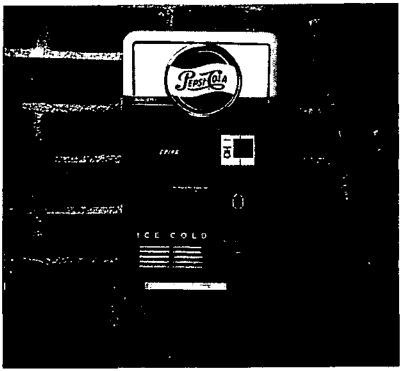
A bear.

Not a black bear, and not even the kind of a black bear they called a cinnamon. A grizzly, a bear like people went a thousand miles to hunt. A grizzly bear for sure, even if there weren't any grizzlies in this part of the

Lifestyles Emporium

Pepsi-Cola® Telephone

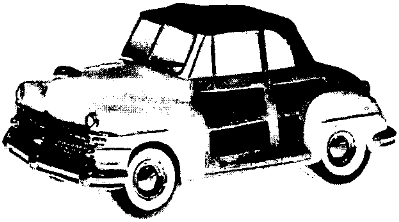
The Red White & Blue is a perfect addition to the family room, den, or home office. The fully functional, wall-mounted tone/pulse phone features an on/off ringer and light switch, star/pound buttons and a last-number redial. It comes with a detachable 6' coil cord, AT&T wall bracket and battery back-up for the ringer light. (Uses 4 "AA" batteries—not included.) **#LE 505**



$45.98 **(plus $6.95 S&H)**

Capture the Magic of a Time Gone By - Park the hand-painted cookie jar in your kitchen and relive a simpler time. This collector's item is both beautiful and functional. A generous 6" high by 13 3/4" wide, it stores many a chocolate chip. A finely detailed replica of Americana that will last for many years. **#LE 404.**

"WOODY" Cookie Jar



$64.98 **(plus $7.95 S&H)**

Call Toll Free
1-800-580-9445
Ask for Dept A1

Check or Money Order To:
Point to Point Dept A1
PO Box 2007
Brick, NJ 08723

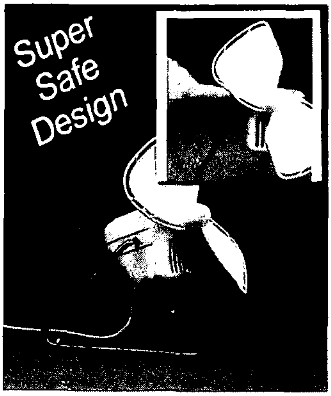
NJ Residents Add 6% Sales Tax/ Canadian Orders Add $6.00
Satisfaction Guaranteed - 30 Day Money Back for Exchange or Refund

Advertisement

Lifestyles Emporium

Compact Fan - Super Safe & Whisper Quiet - The unique design of the Two Speed *'707'* Fan allows for increased air movement due to the revolutionary "No Grill" design. Patented finger-safe blade flexes when the blade is stopped - ensures complete safety. This energy efficient 7" fan delivers air circulation through-out an entire room. Its compact size is perfect for travel or desktop. Non-overheat auto-shutoff - Costs only pennies to operate - 120V AC - UL approved.

#1AH707 ***$22.98*** **(plus $5.95 S&H)**



Unique No Grill Design Moves More Air

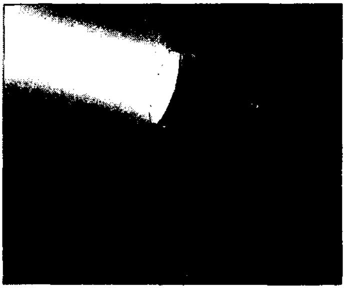
SAVE when you buy 2

2 For $39.98 **(plus $8.95 S&H)**

Unbelievably Bright - Fully Rechargeable 1 MILLION CANDLE SPOTLIGHT

The one million candlepower beam is more powerful than aircraft landing lights - 20X brighter than auto headlights - and will carry for over a mile. Operates from any 12 volt power source when batteries are low or need recharging. Features 100 watt Quartz Halogen Lamp, protective shield around the Lexacon® Lens and computer designed parabolic reflector. Constructed of high impact plastic.

#1AN606 ***$89.98*** **(plus $7.95 S&H)**



Call Toll Free:

1-800-580-9445

NJ Residents Add 6% Sales Tax
Canadian Orders Add $6.00

To Order By Mail Send
Check or Money Order To:
Point to Point
PO Box 2007
Brick, NJ 08723

Advertisement

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

country and hadn't been since the people here wore three-cornered hats and fought Indians.

They said there weren't, anyhow.

There were coyotes now, and they said there weren't any of those either. Coyotes were supposed to be Western animals like grizzlies, animals you saw on the prairie in Texas, and out in the desert. But there was a dead coyote on the road a while back about a half mile from the house.

There it was again!

He pulled the arrow to his ear, then relaxed. Too risky, even if it wasn't too far. He'd only spook it, and this was the chance of a lifetime. Wait. Take your time. Even with a good shot, a big bear will need a lot of killing, and I mean to try and kill it, not just scare it away, and I sure wouldn't want to have it go off into the woods and take two or three months to die.

He put down his bow and wiped his sweating palms on his thighs. Where was it?

The woods were quiet. Even the jay had stopped talking. The jay had been a ways down the slope, probably it was still there, and the bear had gone far enough uphill that the jay wasn't worried, not that a bear would be much danger to a bird anyhow. The jay probably didn't know—it was a big animal, so it was scary. It would eat a bird if it could catch one, that was for sure.

The level sunshine streaked the woods with golden bars that seemed to him to obstruct his vision, illuminating a young sumac as though with a spotlight, leaving a clump of bayberries darker than they had been by night. If the bear was moving he couldn't hear it. It couldn't be snuffling; he would have heard that. No question about it.

There! Behind the fallen log.

Once more he drew his bow. The wind pushed aside a leafy branch, and a gleaming shaft from the sun struck the place on the other side of the log before his own shaft could. A few twigs and dead leaves lay there.

Nothing else.

The laundry smell had grown stronger. Air pollution! Even way out here, there was air pollution. He snorted, allowed the bowstring to straighten again, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

And the bear rose on its hind legs at the sound, as bears will, and held up both paws.

No buck fever now. Back went the arrow to his ear. His release was clean and crisp, sending the long aluminum-shafted broadhead flying from his sixty-pound compound bow nearly as fast as a bullet.

Yet the bear tried to dodge. He saw it in slow motion, like movie blood flying off the teeth of a chain saw, the silver arrow streaking, the bear (almost as short-faced as a man, and not like a black bear very much) trying to writhe away before the arrow got it, the long orange hair on its chest crossed on a slant by a gray streak that was probably from an old scar, a crease from somebody's big-game rifle.

Quick as the bear was, it wasn't quick enough. The arrow hit it a little bit to one side of the breastbone, and buried the big steel head and half the shaft.

He had nocked another before the bear fell, and he let it fly, not so sure of his aim this time. Somewhere among the bushes and fallen branches the bear moaned, a deep, suffering noise that sounded practically human.

That first one got him good, and if you ask me the other one did, too.

A grizzly! His grizzly!

It seemed incredible. It *was* incredible. How many men in the whole damned country had taken a grizzly with bow and arrow? A hundred? Maybe. Maybe no more than a couple of dozen.

A couple dozen, and he was one of them. God had somehow, for some unknowable reason of His own, chosen to bless him beyond and above most other men, and he finally saw the level sunbeams for what they really were, God's fingers, and he thanked God for it, mentally at first, then muttering the words and half ashamed.

Was the bear still there? He peered and squinted, but could not be certain. A cloud passed before the sun and God's fingers were withdrawn, leaving the woods nearly as dark as they had been when he climbed into the blind. It was vitally important that he know; even a wounded buck could be dangerous.

Patiently he waited, twice thinking that he heard something big moving through the brush, each time assuring himself that it was just the wind, just his imagination. Either the bear was there (as it almost certainly was), or it wasn't.

If it was, everything was fine; he had his bear. If it wasn't, he'd have to track it and finish it off, if it still required finishing. He knew himself to be as good a tracker as anybody who hunted these woods, and knew too that he possessed a dogged persistence so great that his coworkers at the plant sometimes thought he was a little crazy, shimming and leveling, adjusting anew and trying again, working through break and then through lunch because doing it—getting it right—meant more to him than conversation or food. The bear would be found, if the bear was findable.

But the bear was probably dead already, lying no more than eight or ten feet from the point where he had shot it.

He took out another arrow just in case.

By degrees that seemed more than painfully slow, the sunlight returned, a little higher than it had been. He leaned from the blind, squinting. The bear probably wasn't—no, positively wasn't—where it had fallen. He could see the place now, see it as clearly as if he stood there, and there was no big animal there, so it had crawled away; with his arrow in it, it wouldn't crawl very far, not even if the second one missed.

And if it had, where was it? Could it have buried itself completely in the dirt? In dirt that was full of roots? That was possible, maybe, but it didn't seem likely, and he couldn't see either arrow.

The wounded bear might be anyplace—might even be waiting for him at the base of the tree.

He climbed down cautiously, stopping twice to look below him. If the bear was there, he couldn't see or hear it.

When he reached the ground, he got out his bow and nocked a third arrow. Bears could charge very fast. A well-placed arrow *might* stop a charging bear. But it might not, and a badly placed one certainly wouldn't. His first shot had been right on target though, and the bear had been losing blood for a good ten minutes. How dangerous could it be?

With his third arrow still nocked, he strode down the game trail, then through the underbrush until he reached the point at which the bear had risen on its hind legs.

There was blood, dark already, clotted and reeking. Here—he put down his bow and knelt to examine the ground—the bear had crawled off, still bleeding but not bleeding nearly as much as he'd have liked, pulling itself along with its front claws and leaving six deep gouges in the litter of twigs and leaves.

That way.

He hesitated. He was honor bound to track down and dispatch a wounded animal, and doubly bound to dispatch one as dangerous as a grizzly. His honor did not demand that he start tracking right away, though, or even walk fast once he'd started.

There was a gleam—a dull, metallic wink—some ten or twelve yards away, probably brass from somebody's deer rifle. Cautiously he made his way over to it and picked it up. It was half an arrow, cleanly snapped in two: the blood-smeared head and a foot and a half of equally smeared hollow aluminum shaft. No bear, no animal of any kind, should have been able to pull that barbed broadhead out.

Looking around he found the other end tangled in a bush.

This was the second arrow, of course, not the first. It had made a shallow wound most likely, and had stopped with the head sticking out, having cut through a lot of fur, flesh, fat, and hide. Thrashing around, the bear had broken the shaft, and with the shaft broken both halves of the arrow had come out. That was what had to have happened.

He sat down on a fallen log. The bear was dying—that was absolutely sure. Very likely, the bear was dead already, and no more than a hundred steps away. However bad the second shot had been, the first one had been in the black. It had hit the bear's chest pretty near center, and gone in deep. As long as its sharp blades were in the wound, every movement, every breath, would do more damage. He'd have another cup of coffee, drinking it slowly and enjoying it, then track the bear, find its body, and skin it. No way in the world could he drag an animal that big back to the van to take over to Lakeside Sporting Goods, where they did taxidermy; but he could skin it and he would, and carry back the pelt and head. What had he done with the thermos? He stood up and looked around before remembering that it was still back in the blind, and returned the arrow to his quiver.

He had almost reached the tree again when he glanced up at his blind with the half-formed idea of checking its effectiveness from the ground (as he had so many times while building it) and saw the wide reddish face glaring down at him.

Sheer terror gripped him, and he ran. When he stopped at last, it was only because the stand of saplings through which he had tried to flee was too thick, almost, for him to move. He fell to his knees gasping, his own hoarse breath too loud for him to hear anything else. Insects looped and dove before his face, intent on entering his mouth, nostrils, and eyes.

As the minutes crept past, his self-possession returned. Wounded animals frequently turned on their attackers. It had never happened to him before, but he had read about such things in hunting and fishing magazines, and heard stories from other hunters. The wounded bear had supposed that he was still in the blind from which his arrows had come; and recovering a little from the initial shock of its wound, had climbed the tree in search of him. That was all.

He shuddered, every muscle shaking as if with cold.

He could have—should have—shot it there, standing solidly on the ground and putting two or three more arrows into it before it could get down. There had been two arrows left in his quiver—three, counting the one he had returned to it.

Thinking of his quiver, he groped for it. It was gone. Had he torn it away, dropped it in order to run faster? He could not remember, could remember only running, running and running, down the wooded slope and through a clearing. Maybe through more than one. Leaping over something that might have been a tree-trunk or the trickling creek.

He got to his feet, his heart still pounding. Could bears hunt by scent? It seemed probable, and if they could it was possible that this bear was still on his trail, still after him. He tried to push aside the terrible memory of its eyes. It would have had to climb down from the blind first, and that had given him a lead.

A bear hunting by scent would move a great deal slower than a charging bear, too. He had seen coonhounds hunt by scent at a dead run, the coon-smell so strong and good they didn't even have to put their noses to the ground; but he had not seen it a lot, and though a bear might have a good nose, it probably wasn't as good as a coonhound's.

Closer every minute, though. It would be getting closer every minute, and not baying like a hound either, but hunting silently, maybe snuffling now and then, so he'd better move, get moving soon, get away from it and find a road or something, and he could hitch a ride back home and get his deer rifle, get a neighbor to run him back out to the van.

Struggling, half walking and half climbing, he freed himself from the saplings and looked around, took a few steps, stopped, and turned, realizing at length that he could not be sure of the direction from which he had entered it.

Walking or trotting—running, he felt sure, was no longer possible for him—at random might bring him nearer the bear. He found his bandanna and mopped his sweating face. It was fall according to the calendar, and the night had been crisp; but the sun was up now, and the day starting to get hot.

He stood still to listen and heard only birdsong. The bear had silenced the birds when it had driven the deer up the slope—silenced every bird around there except for the squawking jay. Birds were singing now, singing in every direction as well as he could judge, so the bear was probably nowhere near.

The best thing would be to circle around. Come up to the van from the other side. He reached into his pocket and found the keys. Once in the van he would be safe, and he could drive home for his deer rifle.

The woods should have been familiar. He had hunted these woods every season for almost twenty years, taken a dozen deer and scores of rabbits and squirrels out of them. He knew them, as he had often told Dean and Juan, like the palm of his hand; but this was a new place, or a place that he was looking at in a new way.

He had not brought a compass, and none was needed. It was early morning still, and at this time of year the sun rose almost due east; he found it without difficulty. North was left, south, right, west behind him; but where was the van?

Cautiously he set out. It was true, of course, still true, that he might be walking toward the bear. True, but not likely. Away from it or at right angles to it were the way to bet, so he would bet like that, and soon—very soon, he hoped—he was bound to see something he recognized, something that would give him his—mentally, he canceled the word *bearings*. Something that would tell him which way the van was.

His blind had been well up a hill, so he avoided them, threading blind, dry little valleys, and once discovering a stagnant pool shrunk almost to a mud flat by the heat of the summer that was only just over. He thought he remembered seeing it once (much fuller then, with a loon's nest at the edge) when he was out hunting with Dad; but he could not be sure, and he couldn't remember where it had been anyway.

Deer flies found him. He got out his repellent and sprayed, but it seemed to do little good.

The sun was too high to direct him now, and he blazed his trail, cutting six inch strips of bark from likely trees with his hunting knife and letting them hang, and breaking the limbs of bushes to point the way he was going—not doing these things so much in the hope that anyone would follow the signs and find him, but to keep himself from circling. Knowing that lost men instinctively turned left, he turned right whenever a choice presented itself, and tried to walk toward distant hilltops or large trees when he could see them.

Toward noon the sun vanished and he heard the rumble of distant thunder. A cool front was on the way, clearly, with a storm for a roadie. He found shelter under a rocky outcrop, took off his boots and stockings, and waited out the rain.

How many times had he read that smart hunters were never without a compass? That it was always wise to carry emergency rations of some sort? Bet's little silver flask still held rock-and-rye. He sipped the sweet, potent liquor in the hope that it would assuage his hunger; but he was no drinker and soon recapped the flask, feeling slightly ill.

Thunder banged and rattled, rain pelted the dry woods, then slacked and faded to a shower as the thunder rolled away among the hills. Wearily he put on his stockings and boots again, rose, and set out, blazing his trail as before and soon encountering blazes that he himself had made only hours ago.

The sun was close to the western horizon when he came upon the road. It was not much of a road, only two streaks of muddy dirt, but among its rutted wanderings he imagined houses and farms, food and rest and telephones, and felt that he'd never beheld anything half so beautiful, not even Bet when chance had thrown them together at a high-school basketball game. Not even Bet, because she was there, too; and she was more beautiful now in the ruts of the dirt road, because she was his as he was hers, and she had given him Rusty.

Rusty ought to have a dog, a birddog, maybe, that they could train together. A birddog and a four-ten.

The road ran northwest and southeast, and there was no way to tell which direction might be better. Either one, he told himself, would be a great deal better than the way he had been going, better than wandering in search of landmarks that somehow weren't ever there.

Following his rule, he turned right. The shadows were long when he came upon the broken pine and stopped. He had seen it before, surely. Had noticed it several times that summer when he was going out to work on his blind. It had not marked the end of the road; the road went on for nearly a half mile more, past the firebreak the rangers had cut three years before. Yet it had been near the end.

His feet were blistered, and he was pretty sure that the blister on the side of the left one had broken, but he went on at a good clip just the same. Another half mile—more like a quarter mile now—and he'd reach the van. He could drive home, get something to eat and a good night's sleep. Come back Sunday morning to find his bear and skin it.

Two saplings up ahead . . . he stopped to look, then hurried forward. They had been bent and partially broken at several points, interlaced to form a knot that wasn't quite a braid. His first thought was that he had failed to notice them that morning, his second that it had been too dark to notice much of anything, his third that it had been done recently; the saplings' leaves were still green for the most part, and there was no sign that either had begun to grow into its tortured new shape.

His fourth was that it had taken enormous strength to do it. He had stopped to feel the bent and twisted trunks when something buzzed past him like an oversized hornet, and he felt that a red-hot poker had been rammed into his right arm. Whirling, he saw the bear, already nocking another arrow.

It missed as he dove into the undergrowth. Not long ago he had thought himself almost too tired to walk. Now he ran again, but not blindly as he had run before with abject terror grinding down his mind. There was a bend here, a pronounced one where the road skirted a hill. He cut across it and found the road again, sprinted down it—falling twice—and reached the van as the bear's third arrow scarred its steel side.

It's bigger than I am. (It was the first coherent thought since he had begun to run again.) And it's stronger, a lot stronger. But I'm faster and maybe I'm smarter.

His arm, limp and drenched with his blood, would not respond when he told it to get the keys from his pocket. He seized the edge of the pocket with his left hand and ripped it open with an effort he would in ordinary circumstances have found flatly impossible.

It was hard to open the door left-handed and maddeningly awkward to jam the key into the ignition switch and start the engine, but he did both, and with his almost-useless right arm managed to knock the shift lever from PARK into DRIVE. He jammed his foot down on the accelerator as he spun the steering wheel one-handed.

Like an angry bull, the van smashed through the roadside brush to turn and charge the dark figure of the bear. There was a shuddering impact. Momentarily the van skewed sidewise. He fought the wheel and raced down the road, covering a mile or more before he dared to slow a little and pull out the headlight switch.

Only one headlight came on.

Suddenly (much too suddenly for him) there was gravel ahead, then asphalt and speeding cars. He should perhaps have slowed and waited for a break in traffic. He did not, charging the highway as he had the bear. Horns blared, and this time the crash was deafening and the world a kaleidoscope of tumbling objects that flashed past too quickly to be seen, though not too fast to strike blows that numbed instead of hurting.

When he crawled from the wreckage, the bear was upon him, a bear itself wrecked, its head and one arm dangling, drenched in its own nauseous blood. He ran, and knew not where he ran, heard the scream of brakes and the sickening impact behind him.

It was after midnight when he got home. Bet helped him out of Dean's car and into the house, ignoring his protests. "Oh my God," she said; and again, "Oh my God." And then, because he had been careful to limp, "Can you climb the stairs?"

And when he had insisted he would be fine on the couch, and eaten two pieces of cold chicken and drunk a glass of milk, and told her a careful mixture of truth and lies, he was able to get her to go up to bed, and opened the drapes.

He waited after that, sitting silent in the dark room, staring out the picture window at the dark street outside and thinking until he had heard the water turned off in the upstairs bathroom and the shutting of their bedroom door. A dozen bruises complained when he stood up, but his right arm, which had begun to throb, throbbed no worse.

"Daddy?"

Rusty was at the top of the stairs in his pajamas, his hair tousled.

"Was it really a bear, Daddy?"

For a second or two he debated, telling himself with perfect truth that Rusty was only a little kid. "Come on down, sport. We don't want to wake up Mom."

Rusty came down with alacrity.

"There really was a bear," his father told him. "But I'm not so sure it was a regular bear." Bending stiffly, he picked up the blue plastic bag the hospital had given him, feeling the paw stir inside.

"Mamma believed you about the car wreck."

He nodded, mostly to himself. "But not about the bear."

Rusty shook his head.

"I didn't tell her everything, either. Just a little bit. I tried to get her to believe it."

"Did you kill the bear, Dad?"

"No." He started for the family room, limping but trying not to. "There were a couple of times when I thought I had, but I didn't. You know my big arrows?"

"Sure."

"I shot it good with two of those, and I figured it was dead. It should've been." He handed Rusty the blue bag and fished his keys from his left pants pocket with his left hand. "It broke one of those arrows and threw the halves away. The kind of thing a man might do, mad because he'd got hurt."

"Was it big?"

He considered. "Yeah. Real big. Four or five hundred pounds, I guess. I took five arrows this morning, sport."

"Sure."

"There's no use carrying more than you need, and the bow license only lets you take one deer. If I missed a couple of shots, I'd still have three. So after it got my bow, I was thinking it only had three, and it shot three at me. One got my arm."

He pointed to the sling, and Rusty nodded, eyes wide. "But there's one more, the one I shot into it that it didn't break. I don't think it can use it now." He opened his gun cabinet. "The rifle would be better," he told Rusty, "but I can't on account of my arm."

The Redhawk was in its holster, and the holster on his gun belt, hanging from a hook. "You're going to have to help me get this thing on. Grab the other end."

Rusty did, and his father stepped into the belt, wrapping the buckle end around him, then turning until the tongue reached the buckle. "You know how these work. Think you can fasten it for me?"

Rusty thrust the tongue into the buckle and pulled back on it. "Tighter," his father said.

When it was fastened to his satisfaction, he drew the Redhawk and pushed the cylinder catch. "Six," he told Rusty. "Six forty-four magnums. I hope that'll do it."

"Sure, Dad."

"I hit it with the van." He snapped the cylinder back into the frame and reholstered the gun. "That was the second time I thought I'd got it. It dented in the right side of the van some and busted a headlight, but it wasn't hurt so bad that it couldn't grab onto something and ride along with me. I'm pretty sure that's what it must have done, because when that car hit me it was right there. It can move pretty fast, if you ask me, but not that fast."

"Is that when you got hurt, Daddy? When the car hit you?"

"Uh huh. That and the arrow. The arrow first. But it got hurt, too. It went for me, and I was so scared I ran right out onto the highway without looking. You mustn't ever do that, Rusty."

"All right."

"I guess it didn't look, either. Anyway, a big truck hit it, an eighteen wheeler. It messed it up pretty bad. Smashed the head flat. You ever see a cat or a squirrel that's been run over and flattened out like that?"

"Sure."

"That's what it looked like, and I thought it was dead. I'd wanted the head, but the head was a mess, and I hadn't killed it anyhow. What did you do with that bag I gave you?"

"On the chair." Rusty turned to get it. "It's gone."

"Yeah, I thought I heard it slide off a minute ago. You look in the living room, I'll look in the kitchen."

After half a minute Rusty joined him there, holding up the blue hospital bag in triumph. "Is it a snake? I can feel it moving around."

His father shook his head. "It's one paw. I don't even know which one." He paused, considering. "The left front. I know it was a front paw, anyhow. I cut it off. Somebody that had a car phone stopped and said he'd called for an ambulance. Think you can untie that?"

Rusty studied the knot in the top of the bag dubiously. "I'll try."

"It's pretty tight. I got a nurse to tie it for me, but then I held the end in my teeth and tightened it up as much as I could. Where was it when you found it?"

"Over in front of the door. I don't think it could get it open."

"After it tore through the bag, maybe. The man with the phone went over to see about the lady in the other car. She was hurt worse than I was, and while we were waiting for the ambulance I cut it off. I wanted something to show you and your Mom."

Rusty's small fingers were picking at the knot. "You didn't, did you? Maybe she would've believed you."

"It had been wearing a sort of a belt over one shoulder. It was gray, and when I'd seen it before I thought it was a scar. I took it, but it was all messed up and I threw it away. Then I cut off that paw. It was real quiet till we got to the hospital. That was when I found out it was still alive and started to figure things out. They gave me that bag to put it in, and sewed up my arm and took care of some other stuff."

"I got it." Rusty looked into the bag. "It smells like Clorox."

"Dump it out on the floor," his father told him, and when Rusty hesitated, reached into the bag and took out the paw.

"Three toes." Rusty regarded the massively clawed digits with awe. "Don't bears got four like a dog?"

"Maybe it lost one in a trap." His father tossed the paw onto the floor between them. "Watch it."

For a minute or more it lay motionless.

"It was wiggling before," Rusty said.

"It's scared. You hit it or drop it or anything, and it keeps quiet a while. I think it's hoping you'll figure it's dead."

"Can it hear us?" Rusty whispered.

"I don't think so."

As he spoke, one thick claw scrabbled the tiles and found a hold in the grout. The paw inched forward.

"It'll go a lot faster in a minute. It's waiting to see if we saw it move."

Rusty knelt beside the paw.

"Don't touch it."

The paw inched forward again, this time with all three claws scrabbling for purchase. "It's got my bow and that last arrow," his father said. "I figure it must have broken the first one, then it got the idea of using them."

As he spoke, the paw raised itself, running on the tips of its claws like a crippled spider.

They followed it to the living room, where he picked it up and returned it to the bag. "Tie this for me, will you, sport?"

"Sure. It's trying to get back to the bear, isn't it, Daddy? Only the bear's dead."

"I don't know. I thought it was dead when I shot it, and then when I ran over it." He sighed. "I was wrong both times, so this time I'm not going to count on anything. It can only fix itself so much, though. There's limits to everything."

Rusty nodded, his fingers busy with the bag.

"We can fix ourselves too. My arm'll heal, and I'll be able to go back to work. But if you cut me up enough like that, if you did it over and over, I'd die."

"You said the head was all mashed up."

"Yeah. That's going to take it a long time, this time, I think. That gave me time to get to the hospital and call Dean to come and get me there—all the things I did. It may not even start trying to put itself back together until the traffic on the highway lets up. That would be after one o'clock, I guess."

"Only the paw knows where it is?" Rusty put the blue bag down hurriedly. "It keeps trying to go there?"

His father nodded. "That's what I think, and it must know where the paw is, too. It'll come and try and get it back, and I think try and kill me like it did before. If it isn't till daylight, it won't get very far. Somebody'll see it and call the police. But if it does it at night, it might get all the way here. You go up to bed now."

Rusty gulped. "Daddy. . . ?"

"I wasn't going to tell you anything, and maybe I shouldn't have. But maybe something like this will happen again after I'm gone, and it'll be good if somebody knows. Don't you forget."

"Are you going to shoot it?" Rusty ventured.

His father nodded. "That'll stop it a while, I figure. A forty-four magnum does a whole lot of damage, and I've got six, and twelve more in the belt loops. I'll cut it up then, and burn the pieces in the barbecue out back. If you hear shooting, don't let Mom come downstairs. Tell her I said."

Rusty nodded solemnly.

"Or call nine-one-one or anything. Now go to bed."

"Daddy—"

"Go to bed, Rusty." Rusty's father pointed sternly with his good arm. "Go up to your room and get in bed. Go to sleep. I've got to make coffee."

When the coffee was on, he turned out the lights and sat down on the couch again. It might be better to meet it outside, he told himself; but it might be worse, too. After a while he would get up and go out and walk around the house. It would keep him awake, anyway.

They'd want a kennel for Rusty's birddog, and he could decide where to put it.

Thinking about birddogs and kennels, and how kennels might be built, he stared out the picture window, waiting in his blind for a shambling figure that had not yet appeared. ●

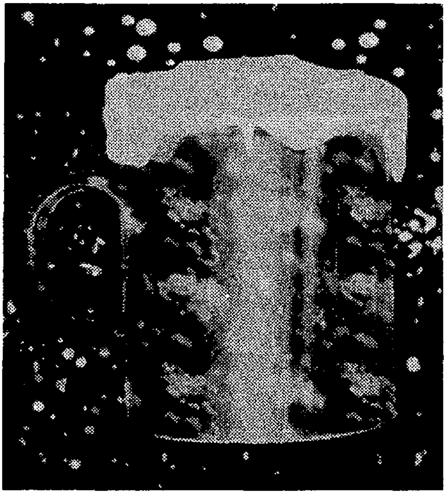


Illustration by Anthony Bari

BASIC CRITERIA

Terraforming ain't complete—
now let me make this clear—
until a planet's capable
of something like a beer,

and something like a burger
to serve up good and hot—
without *these* things then "Terraform"
is NOT what you have got!

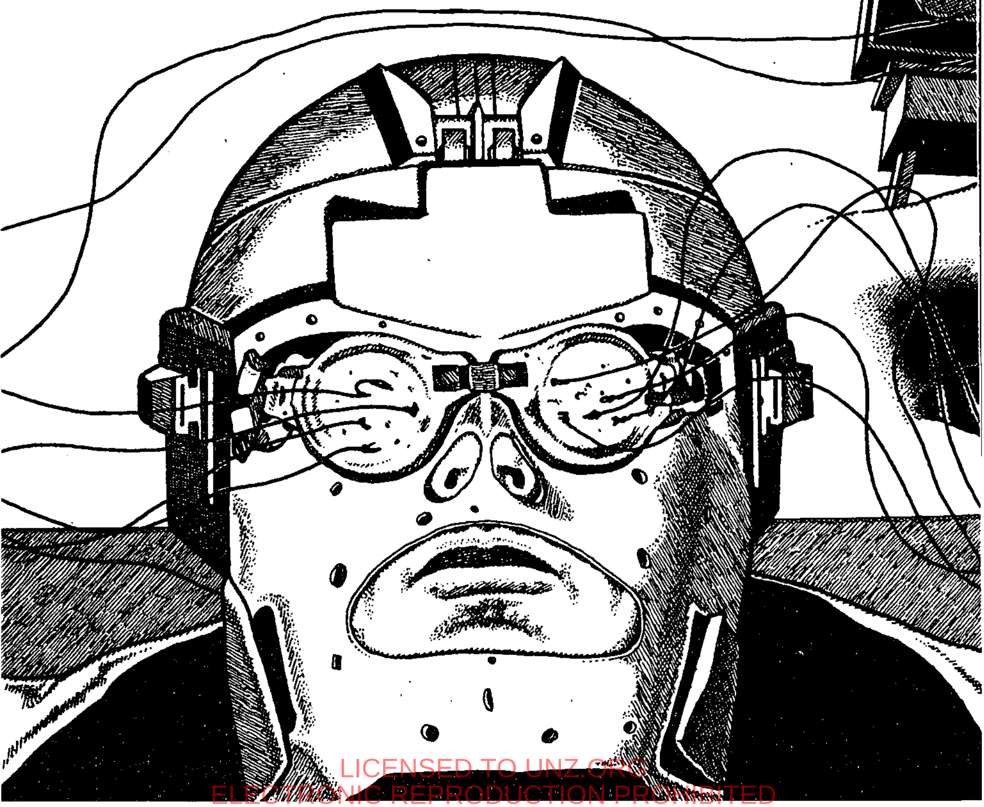
—W. Gregory Stewart

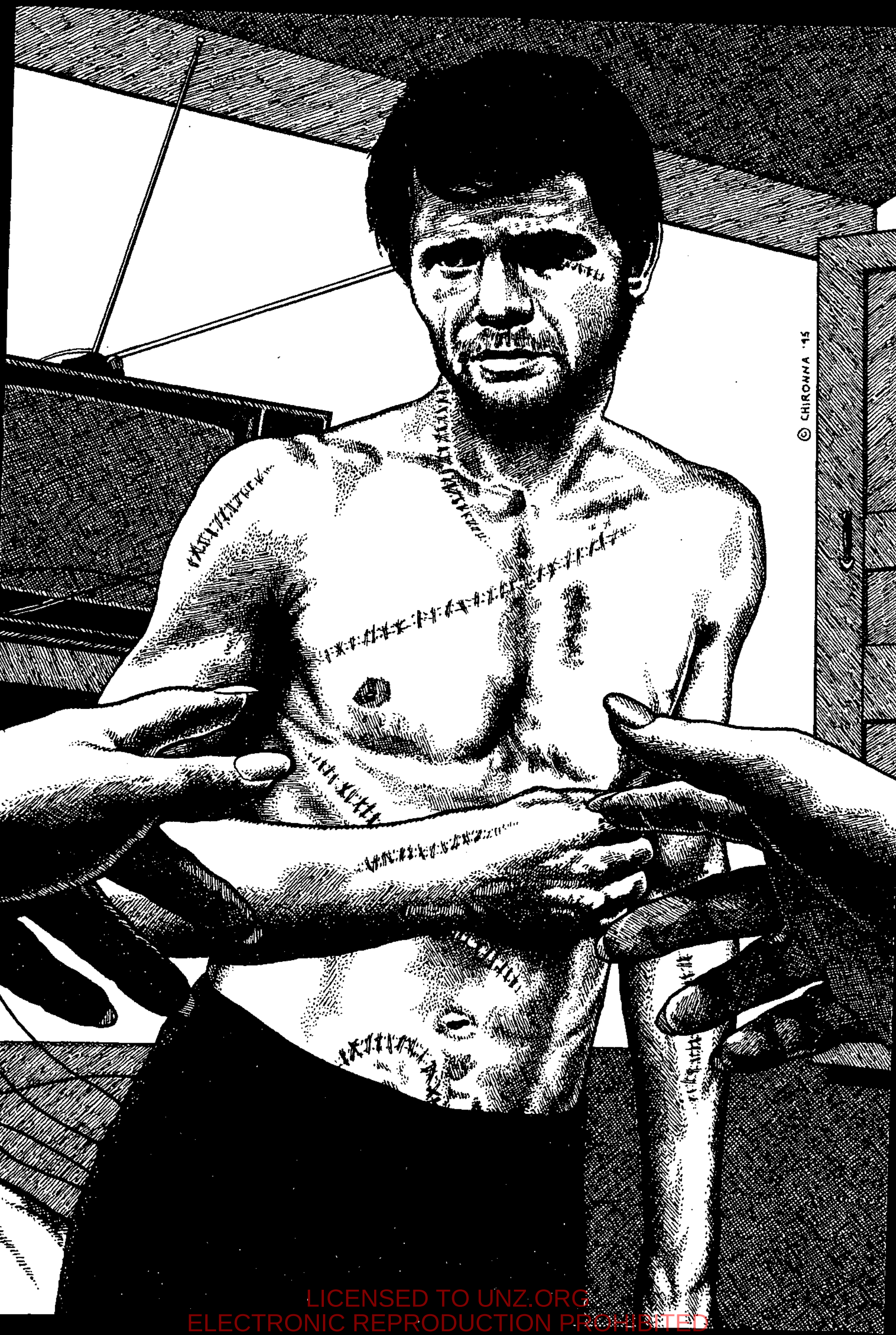
Some of today's most disturbing headlines are taken a terrifying extra step in Ian R. MacLeod's . . .

SWIMMERS BENEATH THE SKIN

Ian R. MacLeod

Illustration by Ron Chironna




© CHIRONNA '15

"Where would you choose?" Ruth says. "There was always somewhere every decade last century, a place to be. It was Paris in the twenties. Haight Ashbury in the sixties. . . ."

Me, Ruth, and Tom Moss are out on a day's ride from the ceasefire zone with our new-issue green UN passes. Up into the misty morning hills in the old Mercedes with PRESS spray-painted on the sides and the roof.

"Think." Ruth smiles beside me in the back, frail and new here. "Maybe London in the Seventies with Thatcher and punk rock. New York in the eighties—cocaine and Porsches. Berlin in the thirties . . ."

"Berlin!" Tom snorts and wipes his nose down the sleeve of his combat jacket as the road worsens.

"Berlin . . ." Ruth looks out through the muddy glass. ". . . Berlin in the twenties. . . ." There's late snow on the hillsides. A burnt-out farmhouse with grey, empty windows standing against the grey and empty sky. Ruth isn't running, but still her eyes are unfocused—far beyond. She's seeing Unter den Linden. Chris Isherwood, Sally Bowles, and the pompous brown-suited marching men. "And maybe Berlin again in the nineties, or even Bejing. . . ."

"What about the rest of the decades? Who wanted to be anywhere in the *forties?*"

"There was always New York, Tom. The greatest brains in the world were there. All the clever Jews who got out. And Stravinsky, and Rachmaninov. Fermi and Einstein. . . ."

Cigarettes are passed. Ruth declines. Her eyes are still full of Berlin, Paris, New York, and Sarajevo as the car greys with smoke. No one says anything. Me and Tom don't know for sure whether those people were where Ruth says they were, but we're educated men of letters, and Ruth's just a jockey to ride the gridnet. We have our pride. And Ruth's also Ruth. She was posted by VARTEL just two days ago to cover this empty civil war, but we've already worked that one out.

The Merc rumbles on along the rubble of what was once a main holiday route. People used to ski in the mountains up there to the east; you can still see the broken gantries of the lifts. Tom breaks the brow of the hill and curses. We crane out through the windows. A Datsun truck lies upturned across the road beside a ruined filling station. There's a red flag, some guys with Kalashnikovs, another in a jeep with a machine gun.

I say, "Worth a shoot?"

Ruth shakes her head.

"Tom? You've got the papers?"

"Yeah. They can't want anything."

"Nah."

"Anyway, fuck the little gits."

"What's the flag?"

"It's red. That's the Communists. You know—Marx. Lenin. Jane Fonda. . . ."

Tom swings the door open and climbs out. He raises a hand, waves our new bits of UN green and walks over to them. Offers the obligatory cigarettes. They're just kids. Back at home, they'd be riding the gridnet.

It takes longer than usual as Tom shrugs, points along the road. Words and signs exchanged. Full of interest, the window down, Ruth watches. I'd get out to help Tom, but he speaks the language and I know that too many foreigners only make these kids nervous. The trees ahead shift and sparkle. A peeling billboard above the petrol station says, in English, The Real Thing. Finally, the kids nod, and Tom walks back toward the car.

"You can tell it's okay from the way he's walking," I say to Ruth. "Look. He hasn't shat himself."

She guffaws, scratching her ribs beneath her new flak jacket.

Tom gets back in the driver's side. He plays it cool, starts up the engine, says nothing.

"Are we rolling or what?"

"We're rolling. Straight on through."

"What about a shoot," I ask. "Ruth?"

Ruth shrugs and smiles. She waves to the kids as they roll back the oil-drums to let us past. They nudge each other and wave back. "There'll be better shoots than this when the sun really comes through. What's ahead, Tom?"

"Glad you asked me that. There's a tank snarl-up two villages down. Heard something else too. About a donor camp. . . ."

I nod sagely. It's an old rumor, but one that the UN still drags out as an argument for sending in more troops. No one believes it (who, here, needs atrocities?) but still, it could change everything if it were true. It's the kind of story that might drag this forgotten conflict back onto the main icons, and us with it.

"It's like this," Tom says. "One of the kids has a brother who has a friend who went missing in the big push against the Nationalists last autumn."

"Oh yeah. . . ?" I say. "And his friend had a girlfriend who has a sister. . ."

Tom smiles patiently. "Just the friend's brother. He was captured and taken to what he says was a donor camp and he managed to get back. He's there." He nods down the road. Through the trees, a turn in the valley shows the roofs of a town rising sunlit over a bluff, guarded by the brownstone walls of a castle.

"So. What's the plan?"

"We go in there. Find this chappie's brother . . . then home to the Holiday Inn before it gets dark. A hot bath, a cold drink . . ."

". . . far too ambitious . . ."

"Yeah. Forget the bath."

The Merc rumbles on toward some new scrap of news that may or may not be, carrying our odd little alliance: Tom, with the WP beneath the driver's seat that he uses to dictate the copy that will curl out as warm newsprint on someone's breakfast table. And me; mostly magazine freelance, peripatetic man-on-the-spot and occasional minder for the jockeys like Ruth that VARTEL sends over.

The town ahead had been worth two stars in the local Michelin Guide. Nestled in a valley bordering forests and foothills, it was once a strategic crossroads and stopping-off point for the jingling pack-wagons and pilgrims heading toward the main mountain passes. Then, lace-making, half-timbered houses, a minor romantic poet, tourism, sleepy anonymity. Then, as all the old agonies spread out and the highways were mined, the harbors blockaded, and the airports captured, the town regained some of its old strategic importance.

We drive in past a half-built industrial estate where smoke stains lick up from the roofs and windows, and birds are singing. Like most of the area outside the cease-fire zone that we cover, this town remains virtually deserted. No one here believes that the uneasy truce between the Communists and the Nationalists will last, and anyway the Christian guns to the south are much too close. The people who used to run the cafés and the bookshops and drive trams and change cash at the banks are now living in the refugee camps over the border, or with relatives in the over-crowded lowland cities to the north, or dead.

We rumble over the bridge leading into the old town with the broken span that the UN sappers rebuilt after one of their own smart bombs drowned during the big bash-up last autumn. The river tumbles and flashes in the gorge below, running full and cold and deep as it always runs at this time of year. Looking out through the golden mid-morning haze at the old streets and houses on the far bank rising toward the castle, I briefly imagine that I can see smoke from the chimneys, washing on the lines, cars in the parking lots, people in the cafés, kids in the parks. It's definitely worth a shoot here, but as I turn to remind Ruth I see that she's already staring, unblinking, through the open window. Definitely running. Taking it all in.

The rule with jockeys is that you leave the technical stuff to them, but many are as ignorant about newsgathering as they are secretive about their craft, and I'm always trying to point them in approximately the right direction and second-guess when they're running. With some of them, it's obvious; on shoot they look and move like zombies. But with others—and, despite her mainly non-news background, Ruth's one of the best I've seen yet—you'd hardly know it was happening. She's a good worker, is Ruth; the unedited stuff we screen-previewed yesterday evening back at the Holiday Inn was more than enough to convince me of that.

"Tom? You know the way to reach this guy?"

"A breeze. No problem."

Off the bridge, and through a square where an old Russian T54 sits rusting, thrust half-way into a building. There's the drone of flies, a bad smell.

"You really *are* sure?"

In my experience, the journalists and outsiders who die are the ones who get lost. As long as you're well-fed and fit, your chances are still good if you get hit by shrapnel or caught in a sniper's alley. For a start, you won't have to spend more than a few hours in the local hospital before a Sikorsky lifts you out. Fatalities for our kind don't come when we're simply somewhere bad; they come when we've failed to realize just how bad somewhere actually is.

Tom swings the car out of the square and up a narrow street. Tires squeal over cobbles. He smiles and glances back. I watch the smile carefully, gauging it for confidence, fear, irony. This is, I suspect, another of Tom's wind-ups, and I wonder as I have wondered before why we have to keep playing these games with each other. As though we want more risk than the situation is already giving us.

A smaller square. An old fountainhead. A flock of starlings picking over the scattered carcass of a dog. Ruth's still got her window down for a shoot and it looks like she's still running. Fresh ivy already drapes the fire-gutted buildings, lavender and heather grows happily from the upturned municipal concrete pots. There's sweetness and decay here. If this scene was ever actually broadcast, VARTEL would probably edit the smell out in deference to the delicate senses of its subscribers. But that would be a shame.

"Shit."

Three rifle shots spark and ping off the cobbles just ahead. But Tom gets the message and stops the Merc on a farthing. From the doorway of a building that looks as wrecked as all the others, an old woman emerges, chewing her gums and hugging herself, to watch the show. It could be a good sign. The engine ticks. We wait.

"You *do* know where you are, Tom?"

"Yeah. Stop worrying. . . ."

A figure, holding a rifle, now stands ahead of us in the road. He raises his hand to the breech. He shifts his stance.

"Then why the blazing fuck don't you get out and talk to him? You know they don't like coming to the—"

"I'll go."

It's Ruth.

"You don't even speak the—"

But the door's open, and she's gone.

"She hasn't even got the papers," I say.

Tom shrugs. "She'll be okay."

After all, this isn't the first stunt Ruth's pulled since she arrived down the UN-protected corridor in the back of a Jupiter. She steps gracefully over fallen clumps of power line and fiber optic. And walks right up to the man. He grins.

Ruth and the man talk. She beckons him back to the car. As she turns, I realize from her slow-moving stare that she's been running all the time, yet still somehow managing to walk, talk, and breathe, to smile that Ruth-smile. To the stubbled guerilla who limps beside her, it all probably just adds to her lovely other-worldliness. She's a thin dark-haired angel—Audrey Hepburn in a flak jacket—and it's a fine, fine, shoot. Walking right up to a gun-toting guerilla in the middle of a silent, ruined town. The adrenaline rush, the stubble and the sweat-sheen on his face. The smell.

"He speaks English," Ruth says, leaning down toward the car, blinking herself off. "He says he'll show us the way up to the castle. That is where you want to go, isn't it, Tom?"

Tom sighs and nods.

The car door swings open, and the man climbs in so he's wedged between me and Ruth in the back with his gun sticking up between his knees. He gazes at the curve of Ruth's uptilted throat and the tiny crinkled scars at the corners of her eyes as she raises the pipette from her eyekit. As the car jerks over a fallen lamppost the saline brims over her lids. Gleaming, it traces the curve of her cheek. Ruth dabs and sniffs.

"Right here," the communist militiaman says, pointing. "You go there between the buildings."

Brownstone walls loom. The castle has stood up remarkably well to history. Napoleon and the Ottomans and Frederick the Great and Stalin and Hitler all somehow passed this valley by, whilst the Christians' big artillery never penetrated far enough to raze the town last autumn and the UN strikes were aimed solely at breaking supply lines to the front. Here, for once, by downing the bridge, they actually achieved that purpose.

Tom stops the car. We climb out. The militiaman walks up to some of his colleagues who've emerged from the old ticket booth by the portcullis. Tom goes over to join them. Beside us, there's an information sign displaying the prices of admittance to the castle in four languages. The rock beside it is melted and cratered with laserfire.

We're beckoned. We follow.

Inside the main walls, generators thwack and there's an old SAM V missile system pointing up at the sky amid the mud and the tents, comically exposed and marked with what looks like Hebrew lettering. That's a new one on me, but I daren't dawdle too close, and pictures are probably out of the question. Ruth's blinking, moving, acting normally. They obviously haven't twigged to what she is, and there's no sense in pushing it.

"You want know about Nazi camp?"

We nod.

Into a tower. Up a stone spiral staircase. High along a battlement above the cliffs, clinging to the handrail in the wind with a hawk soaring below and the countryside spread far and wide to the mountains. Untended, the roads, houses and fields are already barely discernable. Everything is fresh, green, and new.

Through a door, a man sits sweating, smoking, drinking as he watches an old VCR from an armchair. The smell in the room comes from him and from the bucket in the corner. He's got a crooked, nervous smile, big hollows for cheeks, an even bigger hole where his left eye should be.

Amazingly, the door shuts again and we're left alone with him. Tom acts as translator and I sit back on a bench in the corner and let things take their course. I've been in situations like this before, where out of nowhere you seem to stumble on a big story. It usually ends up as just another set-up.

"He says that he wasn't wounded before his capture last February. . . ." Tom begins. "He says he half-expected to be shot anyway, but he was taken with the rest of his unit to . . . I think he means the site of an old cinema complex just outside the capital. That's what? Just forty kils from here. . . ."

"Don't tell me," I feel compelled to mutter. "The bastards forced him to watch the entire *Police Academy* series."

"He was there two months. . . . He wasn't badly fed. . . . He says the food was better than he gets here. . . . No buggerings or beatings. . . ."

The man points to his empty eye socket.

"They took that out first."

With difficulty, the man stands up. Turning his back to us, he lifts the filthy hem of his T-shirt, on which the just-legible wording commemorates the Madonna tour that came here—what?—can it really be only eight years ago? There's a neat surgeon's scar on his back slightly to the side of his spine, where his left kidney would have been.

"They took that out a week or so later. . . ."

He turns to face us and points to his belly. Another scar. Shaped like a happy face smile, it's just below his navel.

"They took that out next. He thinks about half his lower intestine . . ."

The man lifts the T-shirt further over his bony chest. Another scar.

"Then his right lung. . . ."

I glance at Ruth. She shakes her head—meaning, I assume, poor light, not good for a shoot. But then she takes him by the arm and walks him gently over to where the late morning sunlight pours through the arrowslit window. She holds the T-shirt, unsticks it, and lifts it off his body.

She says, "Turn off the VCR."

Tom does so. Aching silence fills the room. Ruth's staring at the man. Close up, her hands on his sides. Unblinking.

"Ask him . . ." Her voice, so as not to upset the sound balance, is a whisper. ". . . how he got out."

I notice there's another scar at his throat that he hasn't mentioned, or perhaps doesn't even know about. The line of healed new flesh is neat and amazingly white.

"He says he pretended to stay under after one of the ops. The surgical and post-op facilities are on a different part of the site, so he knocked out the guy who was wheeling him. Put on his whites and the mask. . . . And walked out."

"You believe *that?*"

"He says the Nationalists are selling spare body parts worldwide. . . . It's a big operation. . . . Gets them the money they need to keep busting the sanctions and get arms. . . ."

"That bit adds up, doesn't it? They must be getting their funding from somewhere."

"Ask him what happens if they want a vital organ."

"He says they kill you."

He's trembling, noticeably weaker now than when we first came in. Gently, Ruth turns him, revolving his ravaged body against the daylight. She lifts his arms and you can almost hear the leathery flesh creak. Despite the ugliness of the moment, there's something about the way she holds him. . . .

"He says they kill you eventually, anyway. They need to get rid of the evidence."

Ruth blinks herself off, takes a shuddering breath, and helps him back on with his T-shirt. Then, as Tom and I just stand and watch in awkward silence, she half-carries him back to his chair.

"The poor guy. . . ."

I tell her, "The scars could be anything, Ruth. I mean, the Communists aren't pussies. They could have done it themselves. . . ."

"Ask him if he'll come back with us to the UNHCR hospital."

The man shakes his head. Tom has to lean forward to catch the words.

"He says he doesn't trust doctors."

Ruth turns the VCR back on for him. Voices fill the room. She lifts the rug back over his legs. "We can't just . . ." she says, looking up at Tom and me, although I can tell from her eyes that she knows the answer.

I touch her shoulder. "We'd better go."

Ruth squeezes his hand goodbye and we all shuffle out of the stinking room. Me and Tom, we've learned to live with far worse and still keep our breakfast. You're not proud of it, but know you have to. You become like the soldiers. You become like the victims.

And this, after all, and even with so little evidence, could still be big. Murdering doctors. Death camps—a ghost from the past century—white coated demon-angel doctors. But why us? A word to Tom from some teenage militia roadblock guard, and we come here in the Merc and they let us straight in. Surely Communist High Command would want to wheel him out at a press conference, show the world just how evil the Nationalists whom they always call Fascists really are? But then, there's a civil war on here and nothing ever goes to plan. So, let's say, just for the purposes of argument, that no one here's made the connection, that the guys in this castle are so wrapped up in their own propaganda that they routinely believe in every atrocity, and hardly think it worth mentioning when some escaped prisoner who's had half his vital organs surgically removed turns up? Or, looking at it another way, perhaps Communist High Command have planned on letting the news trickle out to us. That doesn't necessarily have to mean it's a set-up. After all, who believes anything that's said at press conferences any longer? So perhaps they really do want this story to break this way; as our big discovery. Perhaps someone even knew about Ruth being over and thought that going VR on the story would be a nice final touch. Otherwise, part of me still keeps muttering, it's all too thin, just too much of a coincidence. I mean, maybe if we could go back now, somehow persuade this guy to come with us. . . .

Out of the castle, back into the Merc, we drive down and out of town.

"You got that, Ruth?"

"I think so." Her voice is faint and she's staring out of the window, almost looking as though she's running although I can tell that she isn't.

Tom produces one of his big roll-ups. Lights it, inhales like a drain, passes it back. We drive out of town, through the fog. I offer the spliff to Ruth. The air-conditioning's out, and she buzzes down her window for air and shakes her head.

"Sorry. Is it the smoke? I mean, your eyes . . ."

"No. It's just . . . I used to do dope. But it's too much now, you know. . . . It just makes me shake."

Across the bridge, then back up into the hills. The midday sun. Through the leaves on the trees. A glimpse of a waterfall. A squirrel darts. Across the road ahead. The view back down the valley is wonderful. There's the medieval town. The far tower of that castle on the cliffs where our one-eyed-man waits like Rapunzel. The shimmer of the forest. The mountains clear in the distance.

"Time for a finishing frame," I suggest to Ruth. "Up there. And we could do lunch."

We pull in at an old tourist viewpoint.

"Want to eat first? Ruth. . . ?"

"We'll do the shoot. Try over there."

"Here?" I stand in the clear sunlight, check the backdrop.

"There. . . . Nearly. . . . No, I'm getting that litter bin."

"Here?" Now, I'm right next to the cliff edge. "Two steps back, right?"

Faintly, Ruth smiles. "Say something."

"One, two . . ."

Four meters from me, she tilts her head slightly to check for lightflare, windboom, twitch, shake. "That's fine." Then pauses. "Are you getting that?"

"What?"

"Listen."

Carried on the wind, the faint crick-crack of small arms fire.

"That a problem?" I ask.

"No."

I know, in fact, that shoot-wise, it's great.

"You know what to say?"

I nod.

"Okay." She stills herself and seems to stop breathing. "Go."

"Here, this morning, in the town at my back—" I turn, point "—we were shown something that, even to those of us who imagine we are used to the senseless horrors of this seemingly unending war, has left us shocked. . . ."

And so on. They'll edit in whatever Ruth's managed to capture of the guy's scars as they see fit, or they might save unnecessary jumping if they go for a longer segment and just do it all chronologically. The journey. The castle. Here. Of course, it's unconfirmed, unattributed, and in my report I keep using words like *rumor* and *alleged*. Ruth's face is fixed and absorbed as I talk, a study in poise and unblinking concentration. She needs to keep steady, to focus, to slow and maintain her heart-rate and breathing. I've grown used to this with the various jockeys I've minded, but there's still the feeling at the back of my brain that I'm wasting my time. The gridnet was never meant for hard news. The people who fork out money for the suit and the ports and the descrambler cards are more interested in exploring the bumps and crevices of the latest VARTEL starlet, fighting the evil gizgons over Ursa Minor, or being Louis XIV in Versailles. But still, and as a handy weapon to use against the state monitors and the moral watch committees, VARTEL and its competitors run news menus. They even occasionally risk sending one of their jockeys out to a troublespot. . . .

"You might have heard some rifle fire coming from that way—" I say, concluding "—we're really not sure as yet what that's about. But we'll take a look. It could auger badly for the cease-fire. . . . Cut."

"Okay?" Ruth asks, her face and body relaxing although she still looks tense.

"I should never had said *auger*. . . ."

We sit down by the car on an old picnic bench, and eat. There's crackers and butter in the trunk, beer and frankfurters, a can of cream to squirt over a can of peaches. After what we've seen, we're all shamefully hungry—even Ruth. And I find, of course, that I'm also looking at her. The curve of her jaw, the dark down at the nape of her neck as she leans forward, the crook in her arm where the silver wire and the vein show close to the surface.

"In the nineteen hundreds, I might choose India," she says, batting at a fly. The trees whisper. The guns in the distance go crik-crac. "Be a memsahib up in a bungalow in the hills. Or maybe even Paris again, with Proust and Ravel, Nijinsky, Debussy. . . ."

"Proust was an asthmatic," Tom says, his mouth half-full of bread. "He spent years alone in bed, writing in a cork-lined room."

"Yes, it was a sad time," Ruth says. "Even Proust, the century's greatest novelist, was already looking back. And it was the twilight of the British and the Russian Empires, and there was an arms race in Europe, and the Great War lay ahead. Like now, really, I suppose. More the end than the start of everything. . . ."

Afterward, Tom sits down in the car with the doors open and the Brahms Double Concerto blaring to drown out the gunfire while he works on his WP. He keeps cursing because he can't transmit; there's some problem with the sat footprint—but Ruth and I, with our work already done, clamber up a huge ancient boulder at the edge of the picnic site, following the grooves and scuff-marks made by ancient glacier-ice and thousands of kids' sneakers.

At the top, we're suddenly high, and the treetops bow in the air around us. She sits down crossed-legged like a fairy on a toadstool and folds her hands, closing her eyes and breathing in long and deep through her elfin nose. I squat and wait in my own clumsy fashion, envying the suppleness of her limbs, the ten years she has on me.

"There." She opens her eyes, exhales, looks around at the horizon, and points. "See the mountain to the east with the dark gap. . . ? We went through the pass there. I mean, me and my Mum, my Dad, in the late nineties. Took the tunnel from England, drove on down and way across France, Germany, and in those days the borders weren't even there. Stopped at these little hotels on the way." She smiles. "I remember. . . ."

She shakes her head. The wind lifts her hair and bows the treetops below us.

". . . That's what people in the gridnet think when they see all this, isn't it?" she says. "How nice it once was."

I nod. I, too, can remember melon vendors on a Mediterranean beach. And the taste of sangria, and the rows of fat bodies carelessly browning. And the white old fort above the town, that, quite by chance and in a different century, I watched being strafed widescreen and in quad by a freelance Moslem MIG. But, even before that, none of it had seemed real.

"You've done news before. . . ?"

"Ireland," she says. "A couple of years ago."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

She looks at me with her almond eyes. It's a stupid question; of course it bothers her. "I'm not afraid," she says eventually, raising her shoulders as she breathes deep, lifting her chin to the sun. "Even just now, what we saw. But I want people to *know*."

I have to smile. Even if Ruth wasn't wired to the gridnet, there'd be something a little extraordinary about her. But still, I ask the question I always ask.

"What about you, Ruth? Why did you have it done?"

She looks at me, thinking. There never is a straight answer; like the money, which is good without being anything like real compensation; or the fame, which, for the anonymous jockeys whose skin and eyes and ears and limbs the gridnet subscribers enter, is an illusion cooked up by the VR companies. And the technology is far from perfect; the soft-silver wires that grow beneath the skin and flex and change impedance with temperature, pressure, movement; the ear and eye implants; the necessary power supplies, data storage and download circuits, all of it adds up to a huge bodily invasion. A jockey once said to me that it was like having a cage of barbed wire inside you. But we were huddled together in muddy jungle rain at the time, waiting for a truck that was already three hours late, and the blood was still trickling out from a cheese-wired rent in his thigh when he said it. Most of the jockeys I've met are heavy on endorphins and keep themselves ferociously fit. Even the off-line periods of rest and re-tuning are scarcely their own. And then there are the cancer scares, and the dreadful images you see of what's become of those famous early efforts now that they're getting old. . . .

"My dad," Ruth says, "he did multi-media stuff in his spare time from the Corporation." She smiles at the memory, and looks back up again at the sun. "He used to have all these screens and midis and sequences pulsing in a shed in the garden. Cables everywhere. Blues and whites and seabirds keening like an arctic cave. He always said the time would come when we'd all have total control over our environment. . . ." She catches my smile. "I know that from here that sounds like a joke. . . ."

I shift my cramped legs on the boulder, and gaze at Ruth.

"Then, I wanted to be a dancer. I mean, that was what I always wanted. And I was always good, you know? Won all the local prizes. I thought I'd be the new Fonteyn. It didn't work out that way, of course. I got older. I grew. And I didn't grow in quite the right ways. I suppose I could have made it in the back rows, but the market was dying out anyway. People don't listen to real music, they don't want to risk going out at night to see real people dance. . . ."

"So you chose the gridnet?"

"Someone suggested it. Even then, just a few years back, it was more difficult. Of course, my brother used to have this cheap CASIO suit at home, and I'd had a few goes in it, but I was never really bothered. I was never convinced. I was surprised when all the other jockeys I met said the same thing. Surprised and encouraged. But then you must know that. We're an odd breed. . . ."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Some of it. White rapid shooting. I loved that. Once, I went tobogganing up in the mountains. Jesus, it was fast and lovely and I was scared—and all of that came through. It was in the icon top ten for a while. Even now, they sometimes still run it. . . ."

Ruth rubs her arms as though she's trying to get at some itch below the surface and looks away. In the distance, small-arms fire still crackles.

"But it's a job," she says, "isn't it? All those dreams, and you still end up doing a particular something. Everything narrows down. I wanted to know about the world. And I suppose I liked the idea of experiencing it for someone else. For thousands of other people I'll never know. . . ."

Looking down, I see that Tom's finished with the WP and is waiting. We slide down off the boulder to join him. He still hasn't made the sat link, but there'll be plenty of time for that when we get back to the big hardware on the roof at the Holiday Inn. He starts up the Merc. The trees and the hills and the burnt-out houses slip by. The guns are louder now. Not just crik-crac but boom-boom. And I realize that, despite what I'd said through Ruth to the gridnet, I hadn't seriously imagined that we would actually have to go anywhere near them to get back to the hotel.

Tom stops the car on the crest of a hill. The regional capital is visible through the greenly shimmering afternoon. The river. The bypass. The big, empty, shell-holed supermarket. Ruth's window is down. The guns are still crackling.

"I thought you said the snarl-up was three villages east?"

"I did. They must have moved."

"But this is . . ." What? The cease-fire zone? Since when did we start believing?

"Just keep driving."

"Hey . . ."

The thunder of a jet. We look out and up, expecting something high, one of the UN recon drones. But the sound is closing, and a black dart is racing loud and low and fast down the valley. Tom and I, we jump out of the car and tumble down the verge. We peer over the nettles as a dart-shaped shadow leaps over the trees and fields and the roofless houses. I look for Ruth beside me, but she's still back up the slope, standing right by the roadside where there's a clear view of the jet. And the shadow is tilting, turning up the side of the valley, following the road toward the open-doored Merc in what, even with the fractional delay between pilot and computer, computer and satellite, satellite and plane, would be a bone-crushing maneuver if the pilot were actually in there. And the engine tone is changing. Everything is happening fast and in slow motion.

There's no doubt now that the jet has seen the car. And Ruth's just standing there by it. Watching. Running. Panning.

The sound breaks in incredible thunder over us, and the jet goes by with burners glowing, fins raising stripes of vapor as it banks at an incredible angle back along the valley. All radar-slewing angles and superblack paint. No markers, and we were just being buzzed.

Ruth's face is flushed.

"Did you see that!"

Tom and I clamber back up to join her.

"Did you feel it?"

My feet are soaked, and my hands and the back of one leg are on fire from the nettles. Ruth does a vista shoot to front-and-back the stored image of the jet, then she blinks and re-focuses, and I say a few words shaky to head-frame, although I know they'll probably be edited out. The guns ahead are less frequent now, but even allowing for the way the sound carries in these valleys when the clouds close in, those still firing are closer than ever. And now we can also hear the unmistakable rumble of caterpillar tracks on tarmac. . . .

We clamber back into the Merc. Tom drives on down the road. The superblack jet's still rumbling, circling, passing between the hills, and the guns ahead are still firing. Crik-crac boom-boom. Insects are droning. There's a smell of grass and woodland and diesel oil. We pass the red flag and the upturned Datsun that marked the Communist checkpoint this morning, but there's no one there now and the grey clouds are thickening, closing in for rain.

We reach the town just as the first drops fall, chasing the dust down the Merc's windows and drumming fingers on the roof. Nationalist tanks and APCs are squatting in the main squares, and I can see illegal or pre-sanctions American and Chinese exports, all of them with that black-white-red logo—one of those things that looks almost exactly like a swastika without actually being one—for which they really must have to buy, when you think about it, one hell of a lot of paint. Huddled in their raincloaks or sheltered in broken shop windows, the UN soldiers look on as Nationalist Jeeps and Subarus growl and hiss along the gleaming streets. So much, then, for the cease-fire zone, but without a new mandate there's not much else these guys can do. There's a glimpse of figures clustered over what might be a body down a narrow street, but most of the firing is up in the air. It's hard, anyway, to believe that the Nationalists will have caught many of the Communist militiamen they've always alleged are hiding under the thin cover of the UN umbrella. They'll mostly have run for the hills at the first whiff of trouble.

Our route takes us past the old soccer stadium where the team, when there was a team, once had a good run in the European Championship; when there was a European Championship. There's a line of old tourist coaches parked outside, at least a dozen, down on their tires. In English, French, German, their fading paintwork still promises Air-Conditioning, Personal TV Screens, Reclining Seats, a Toilet.

Ruth keeps her window up—it's striped with condensation, but she's running anyway. Grey and white, the scene already looks unreal, like an old James Whale film. The sky is rumbling like a leaden door, but when I look up, expecting flashes of light to be playing over the hills, I see that it's the superblack jet, still zooming, buzzing, circling the town.

A small crowd of locals have gathered outside the fence that surrounds the Holiday Inn. Faces push, arms wave, but there isn't much sense of hope. We also have to stand out in the rain as the Merc is belatedly searched. A Nationalist captain calls us over, looks at our papers, ticks us off some list. There is, he informs us with a look almost of sorrow, a total ban on all newsgathering and communication until the town has been secured. Is that understood?

We nod. Of course. These soldiers are kosher professionals—the old State Army, leaning on their AK-47s, scowling—and they look reassuringly bored. Water dribbles from the peaks of their caps. It's quieter here. The sound of shooting is faint. Past the splayed wreckage of the drive-in Pizza Hut, a solitary truck rumbles by. We look for faces at the back window, but they're blacked over. No chance of a shoot, not even for Ruth.

Leaning back against the wire of the hotel fence, watching as the Merc's entire back seat emerges into the rain, Ruth asks, "Does this mean we won't get a chance to run the story?"

"The Nationalists are professionals," I say. "They'll probably turn off the jammers and do a press conference in the morning. . . ."

"All good Nazis under the eyes of the world?" She laughs. A droplet of rain forms on her chin, falls, is replaced by another. Her flak jacket is already dark. She pushes hair from her face, winces at some internal pain, and I glimpse the tiny silver scar that lies behind her ear.

"Something like that," I say. "You must get used to calling them Nationalists, too, Ruth. Now they're in charge here."

"Fuck them. You saw what they did to that man in the castle. We've got to get this out."

I gaze at her. Should I tell her that some stories are almost too good?

Tom balls his fists and stamps up and down through the puddles as the Merc is searched. Rain shields the hills. It drifts and eddies amongst the gantries and warehouses of the old container base on the far side of the road. Zoom. The jet goes over again, and the Merc is almost back in one piece, although Tom's apoplectic.

"This is the tools of our fucking trade! How are we supposed to get anywhere?" He aims a savage kick at one of the tires. "*Do* anything?"

"It's just a car, Tom," I say, wondering if I should place a calming hand on his shoulder. Wondering why, after what we've seen today, he manages to reserve his anger for this. "Leave it."

The hotel gates open for us. The Nationalists have shown us who's in charge, which was what this whole exercise with stripping the Merc was about. Still breathing hard, Tom drives across to the hotel entrance. Wet, stiff, exhausted, we climb up the pseudo marble steps and pass through the automatic doors. Into the Holiday Inn.

Despite all that's happened today, barely anything in here seems to have changed. Off to the left, in the bar, there's the usual clusters, the usual raised voices, the usual haze of cigarettes. And the hotel's environmental mainframe is still pumping out an early evening mood-mix of lavender and coffee, and playing Mozart. The locals who work here look brisk and worried tonight. Glad they're not outside, but troubled sick about what's happening to those who are. And some of the UN force are also wandering around the foyer, looking angry and confused.

Tom heads off to join the throng. Ruth's gone too. After all, there's no hurry to do anything—the word is that every cable and transmitter has been pulled or jammed. Feeling tired and alert, sick and hungry, needing to talk and to be alone, I go over to the lift, press the button, and head along the pink corridor for my room, where my bed hasn't been made, the trashcan's unemptied, the tea and the minibar are unreplenished. But still, and despite the hotel mainframe's best efforts, the place still smells reassuringly the way a hotel room should; of old socks and soap and cigar butts and cleaning solvent; absolutely nothing like home.

I set the bath to hot and high. I strip, I plunge. Entwined in steam, I try to imagine what's going on tonight in this town, how best—if and when the Nationalists let us get on with our job—I'll be able to convey it, and maybe still even slip in the donor camp story to VARTEL's probably less than eager subscribers. After all, sensibilities are likely to get a little trampled by the news that Auntie Maud's new kidneys didn't actually come from the remains of some fortuitous hit-and-run in Mexico City after all. Back in the castle, I was momentarily convinced, excited. But the idea isn't a new one, and anyway, I've seen enough corpses, people shot and mutilated just because no one could think of anything better to do with them. Would it really be so bad, to save a few lives with bits of them instead of leaving them to rot in the river? And just how much horror does the gridnet need? Isn't the mere fact of war bad enough? And if the story really is the plant that I imagine it probably is, just how big a fool would breaking it make me?

Still, it's my life. My living. You come over to where the action is with whatever dream makes you run this far, you wrangle your Press accred-

itation, you put yourself out on the line, you make your big-break report, and soon, everything is just another story: some neat human-interest morsel for one of the surviving glossies, or a way of justifying my VARTEL retainer. Home becomes a hotel room, a trench, the arms of someone you don't know, a bar, a taxi. Me, I made the clean break and accepted the fact years ago. Tom Moss, on the other hand, he has a wife, a house, a family—they're not even divorced. He's told me how he goes back there every few months, how he walks the dog and mows the lawn and sits like some strange ice statue in his own lounge. Here—wherever here currently happens to be—he's as relaxed as anyone. But after a few days at home his head and the muscles of his jaw ache from trying to keep smiling, he can't sleep. He feels like screaming.

I unwrap a new little bar of soap, open a new tube of shampoo, and wash. We all have our own ways of coping. Tom with the spliffs. Almost everyone with the piss-taking and the fucking and the booze. Me, I just try to keep laughing and disengaged. I suppose that my decision to slum it with magazines and VARTEL reflects that fact. Not that I was ever good enough to get a contract with any of the rusty media flagships, but the magazines are fast losing circulation and nowadays most of the to-head stuff I get to do for VARTEL gets edited out. Ruth or her successors will soon be out here on their own—either that, or they'll dump news from the icons entirely. I mean, who needs this real world stuff when you can be dazzled in the shiny coral oceans and clouds of a million other unreal ones? And what real thrills and horrors could possibly compete with those cooked up inside some bright and vicious teenager's head?

I climb from the bath onto the disposable paper mat Provided For My Convenience, dry myself, and dress. Out through a window misted with bath-steam, I can still hear the faint crackle of guns, and in my bones there's a gathering empty chill.

Down beyond the foyer and the dark of the plateglass windows, the atmosphere in the hotel bar is almost upbeat. This town, after all, has been a dead news zone for months, and what stories we've had have all been grey of the bureaucratic inertia, random atrocity, malnutrition. Despite everything, this decisive sweep by the Nationalists, the rumble of tanks and APCs, their whole fuck-the-UN attitude, is weirdly refreshing. Here inside the Holiday Inn, they're keeping a low profile. There's a couple of Nationalist captains drinking self-consciously at the bar, there's another one keeping an eye on the passing traffic in the foyer, and there are a few NCOs with nightsight guns out front, but they're not talking: they'll know about what their High Command sees as the media bias against the Nationalist cause, the way some stations other than VARTEL keep calling them Nazis and Fascists, their brave photogenic leader a new Hitler. And the way, even under the counter, what's left of the West won't ever sell them quite enough arms to finish the job.

Of course, Tom's down in the bar. Ruth is too, sitting at a big circular table where several other of the male hacks, drawn like moths to her flame, are also starting to gather. I take a place near to her and find a beer. With reports untransmitted, the hotel cordoned off and with no chance of anything more serious to do than get maudlin-drunk, the talk passes rapidly through the usual journalistic themes of worrying about the fate of contacts, translators, officials, and lovers outside, to playing and replaying the many but unsurprising angles from which this new flare-up could be covered. I suggest some of us try to get over with the Christians. Since the sanctions started to bite, they've always kept the media under strictly mindered control back in their ski resort capital, but despite all the Communist posing, the guns and the shells that have thumped and zinged and flown in our direction have generally come out of Christian barrels. Inevitably, and even though you often don't realize that you're doing it, you start to take sides. . . .

Ruth, although obviously as tired as I am from this long day, fits in easily enough with all this chatter. She waggles her head at some joke and laughs and nearly spills her orange-and-whatever. She seems merry drunk from the look of her, and trying hard to push that guy in the castle out of her mind. Soon, she may even start talking, spoiling my and Tom's big news break, but we're close enough anyway to the time when people start believing their own stories, and the atrocity ones always come high on the list. The barrel washed down the river that's filled with the heads of babies. The wedding party crucified in church. She could start talking about the donor camp thing now and everyone would nod and no one would believe her. . . .

Tom lights a spliff nearby. Someone else goes off to file another useless report. There's a pause, and blow drifts with the cigarette smoke around the ceiling lights and the flock-covered walls and the prints of old engravings of supposed local beauty spots that no one's ever been able to identify. All we can hear is the faint hum of the air conditioning as it tries to put the odor of lilac into this stale and talked-out air, but outside, across this town where the UN men sleep or watch uselessly through the fences of their barracks, where the coaches wait outside the soccer stadium, where the broken doorways of the burnt-out shops will probably contain a new harvest of desecrated bodies in the morning, there's nothing but silence.

Someone takes the spliff, passes it on. Tom lights another. Someone else goes off to grab a bottle from the now uninhabited bar.

"Fancy some?"

A white powder. I shake my head. It's time, if the morning is to be anything other than a dead zone, to get up to my room. But I remain seated, a fly caught in this turgid amber. And the powder is shaken into a glass of Holiday Inn Cola, and passed around, and I take it and drink some anyway.

Tom, I see, has already gone off to bed. Or perhaps, in expectation of some break in the blackout, he's recording the message he'll eventually send home to his un-ex wife. How nice it must be, to have someone out there who's worried about you. And Ruth; has she got anyone? But of course I haven't asked. It's generally best not to.

"And where would you be anyway? Last century, there was always somewhere. . . ."

She smiles, and sips her drink. The question hovers in the air. More powders are shaken. Most of the older hands have already disappeared for the night, but still she's hit the mood precisely.

I gaze at the dazzling red edging on her white blouse. I watch the sway of her hair, the scars on her throat as she laughs and swallows. And she's wearing a Snoopy badge pinned to the collar. He's winking and smiling as she moves, mouthing some Snoopy-truism that I can't catch. And the talk is of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London, and I can't help thinking how laughable it is, to be wading in nostalgia for a century that spanned two world wars, Pol Pot, Stalin, Hitler. . . . But still, look back, look back. Like Proust in his cork-lined room a century before, like us trapped in this hotel, like the millions of subscribers to the gridnet, like the poor buggers who were taken a few months back from those coaches and strung up to rot in the soccer stadium. What else is there to do?

Now, Ruth's rising from the table. Her hand catches at a glass. The silvered edges tumble.

"Can you help me. . . ?"

We stagger together to the lift. The Nationalist captain watches us, almost smiles. Ruth's humming again now, laughing. But she's a heavy weight on my shoulders as I press the button and wait, feeling the catch and the rumble in her throat as she tries to tell me something about remembering that Einstein and Fermi were really in Chicago in the forties and watching the pink carpet of the foyer pulse and contract.

The lift opens and we float in. Part of me is drunk, high, laughing at a joke I didn't hear myself make, and part of me is feeling the shift of Ruth's breasts beneath her blouse as she presses up against me and the tickle of her hair against my mouth, calculating tangents and possibilities. The doors slide closed. Ruth catches my hand as I reach to press for our floor. Instead, she presses One, and turns back toward me, suddenly straight and clear-eyed.

"Aren't you coming?" she asks.

"Where?"

The door slides open.

"Look. . . ."

Keeping my mouth shut, I follow her along the first floor corridor. Past the old kiddies' playroom. Past the hotel shop. Past the hairdressing salon. A beetle scuttles from the darkness. I step over it, and save a life. At the far end, in what used to be the conference suite and is now the AP/Reuters office where we normally download our reports, the terminals and screens glow blindly. Scramblers scramble. Static pulses, flicks over, condenses, snows. An undersea roar. Plugs and wires uncoil. It's empty here, but still I catch the dull murmur of newspeak.

". . . message is clear . . . suggestion is that . . . agonize over . . . NATO strikes . . . tightened sanctions . . . essential backdrop . . . amid new signs . . . playing down the importance . . . local sources suggest . . . troops combing the town . . . reports of . . . atrocities . . . underlines the failure of . . . United Nations . . . peace efforts . . ."

But it isn't really as though this place has been carrying on without us. The sound comes from just one speaker, a buzzing floppy that's been stuffed into the wrong terminal.

She asks, "Could we use any of this to transmit?"

"No. We're easily scrambled here. It's a fragile thing, to track and maintain the antennas on the roof and—"

"Couldn't we use someone's portable?"

"They don't have the bandwidth, Ruth." I search my mind, thinking of the Nationalists all around us now and the basic frailty of the story. Thinking excuses, excuses. . . . "Anyway, it'll all be jammed. You can see what it's like."

"Yes." She leans against a console. "I can see what it's like."

"Look . . ." I say. Just exactly what is she thinking? ". . . the donor camp story will keep . . ."

"How big is it? I mean really?"

"It's a bad, old rumor . . ." I shake my head. There's something about the way she's watching me that makes me wonder if she isn't running now. "And it's something the Nationalists have always denied."

"Well, they would, wouldn't they?"

"So, yes, it's big, but it's something we'll need to verify."

Ruth pushes herself up from the console. "Come on. If we can't do anything else, we could at least check that the stuff is viable. . . ."

I shrug and nod and pick up the boxes and cables, the floppy silver veined frogman's suit.

Along corridors, up the stairs, we get the kit up to her room. Which, if not by this roundabout way, was where I wanted to be anyway. My here and now—my Proust's Paris and Isherwood's Unter den Linden—the place I would choose even though I know it's transitory and, ultimately, will come to nothing. Ruth's fingers are quick and proficient on the door-code. Inside, in her bedroom, I see that she's opted for an expensive suite with one of the big-screen walls that, even when the tube gives out, us long-term residents find so annoying. And it's all so very neat. No crisp packets under the bed. No muddy boots on the windowledge. Nothing at all, in fact. A blank space. It's the hotel room of the future. The faintly glowing screen fills the wall, the hotel console still is working, with LEDS that are like Christmas lights, and the bed offers twenty options, although none of them are for dreamless sleep.

"Down there," I say, to fill the silence, "I thought you were drunk."

"Oh, I am." Ruth laughs, sways and twirls on the deep pile like the dancer she nearly was. "Down there, I was. Really. . . ."

"Anyway. . . ." I dump the VR kit beside the stuff Ruth brought up on the bed. A rubber monster. "We'll need the console's power supply."

"Yes."

"And you. . . ."

Ruth nods. There isn't a particularly easy way to say this, but of course she's been through this a million times before. She goes off into the bathroom and shuts the door and runs the taps, flushes the cistern.

"Last thing I did," she says, emerging, as though she only just remembered, "was at a health farm. It was quite pleasant, actually." She laughs. "But can you imagine? Putting on a suit so that you can have someone else's sauna and massage?"

I smile. Thinking, you could use it yourself, Ruth. Re-enter your own skin and unwind. Unravel those silver wires. But jockeys never get the joke, and I can see that she's tense already, the way they always are before they download.

I say, "Okay. . . ."

"Will you do it? You could hook it up to the screen, but I can't judge. . . ."

Jockeys never can. All it takes is a weak stimulus and a true memory seems real anyway. The smell of acacia, the clink of a plate, the taste of tea-dipped madeleine, laughter in the beerhalls. . . .

"Okay." We find the plugs and the sockets. We untangle the snakes. The little boxes start to hum. Multipin to multipin, Ruth unbuttons her blouse to midway, and Snoopy winks and smiles. A heraldic crab of gold, silicon and carbon, is clamped beneath her sternum, and the surrounding flesh and scar tissue is inflamed.

She leans to the bed and picks out the fastest and fattest of the fiber optics. The blouse falls further open with the push of her breasts but my eyes are fixed on the output crab as if it really is the focus of her body. She takes a breath, lines up the sockets, and pushes. She'll already have cleaned any grundge out from the tiny plugs, and the fit is immediate and neat. The main com box on the bed bleeps as it senses the correct decoder.

"Are you ready?"

Ruth nods, holding the cable firmly to keep the pressure off the nerves in her ribs. Useless to ask whether she's comfortable, but then it only takes a moment. So.

I key in the command.

The disk kicks, whirs. Ruth closes her eyes. She shivers slightly. Then I get the confirm beep, and it's done.

"That's it," I say, unnecessarily.

Ruth unclips the release and re-boxes the plug inside its sterilizer. We take a backup just to be sure. I'm conscious of the texture of each pad and button as I touch, select, confirm. Now, the light from the big screen above the bed is a soft pressure and I can feel Ruth breathing and moving, the friction of air on cloth and skin. A point of her hair falls to her cheek. Her blouse is still unbuttoned, and as she reaches, the silver lines run along the inner curve of her arm, fanning out toward thumb and palm and fingers.

The crumpled VR suit lies on the bed, frayed at the wrists, stained at the armpits, with a dodgy hot/cold connection in one of the legs, face like a ski mask and black video-screen dead man coins for eyes. No need, of course, for me to strip entirely just to test the verity of a potential newscast, and, even wandering the moon-silvered woods of Lothlórien, this suit would badly need a dry clean to get rid of the lockeroom smell. But still it makes sense to take off my shirt, my shoes, my socks, and by then I'm feeling Ruth's gaze and wondering what difference it would make anyway, wondering too if my shorts will start to show the slow erection that's already present in my head. But no. Sex is still an unearthed potential, a current between unbridged wires. Everything swims and creaks and fastens as I step, peel and then seal the magnetic links. Cold on my flesh. Ready to go under, ready to dive. A loose wire presses my back and a dumb CASIO commercial about a million users on a million nights making the right choice grinds and sparkles and runs in my head like colored sand.

Ruth watches. Hands me a glove. The other glove is missing. She searches for the other glove. Half smiling, she hands me the other glove. And where would you be, Ruth? Where would you be? The answer, of course, lies in those silver wires and with the thousands of gridnet subscribers in their armed and gated suburbs who, if the icon seems attractive enough, will, after Ruth's been re-downloaded and edited, after whatever I've said has been processed and overdubbed to give the whole experience some kind of meaning, step into their suits one evening and enter a digitized simulacrum of her body. And escape. The only place to be now—the point where dreams intersect—is nowhere.

The helmet, the hat, the hood. Supine on the bed I hear, faintly, Ruth's voice. Ready? Yes, ready. And I press the place of giving darkness before me and a door slides open as the wires engage, circle, tighten. They shift, embrace, suggest. I tilt, swim. Down under. Deep south to arctic caves where the air is salt and the birds keen and the sea sighs. Me, I'm beneath a floe. A swimmer beneath the skin.

Into the Merc, where colors shift and the engine and the tires rumble and the sound badly needs re-equalizing, but I was there as well and the gates of such memory are easily opened. Here. Out on a day's ride out from the cease-fire zone. Into the misty morning hills.

"Think." I hear myself say. "Maybe London in the Seventies with Thatcher and punk rock. New York in the eighties. Cocaine and Porsches. Berlin in the thirties. . . ."

She was running *then?* What was the point? A waste of on-time. I reach an invisible arm and pull. A bright icon hangs before me in the car, the options etched out and lit though the back of Tom's head. Forward. Forward. A pit deepens, numbers click, colors run. Somehow, disturbingly, I can hear the sound of my own heartbeat and breathing as a counterpoint to the signature track of Ruth's body. Another suit fault that'll need sorting.

I pull back to Play. The bridge into the town. The castle on the cliffs. Soft air and sunlight on my face. The scent and the sound far below of the swift river. Bright light, everything steady and in focus. Lovely sense of depth. Then on into empty streets. The smell of decay, just as I imagined, or thought, or remembered. Rifle shots ping. And I open the Merc's door. My legs soften a little as I pick my way over the fiberoptic and I walk up to the gunman, but the overlay signals from Ruth are too strong to assess here, and will, like everything else, need some serious editing. I feel the odd play and tension of different muscles as I move, the pressure of strange clothing, the weight of the flak jacket on thinner shoulders, the swell of breasts, a thinner belly, the space between my legs, the faint prickle and resistance, even, of the silver wires tunneled beneath my flesh. I talk to the Communist militiaman, who stares at me in a way that no Communist militiaman ever has or will. I freeze, run back, forward. Ruth walks back toward the car, and for the first time I see her own face, distorted in reflection through the window-grime. I look blankly uneasy. I look much older and younger than I am. Then forward.

The crucial shot. The man with one eye in the tower in the castle. It feels different, to see him now. Almost some emotion that doesn't feel like my own. But, although posture, scent, breath may convey subconscious clues to the jockey's mind-state, the heart is still the one thing you can't get really beneath the skin of. My hands touch his flesh. My throat and my belly ache as I turn him in the warm light from the arrowslit window. Some kind of hurt that isn't. But, yes, it's all there, clear enough. Impossible, but I really am picking up Ruth's anger and horror. The light's poor and the edges of the room dissolve in formless grey and I'm not getting Tom's interjected translations as clearly as I might because of a catch in my own breathing. But it seems like it's there. It's there.

I turn to the face beside me. My own face. I pull down an icon. I run. Some garbled stuff here as she tests for the to-head shot again. Wind. Grass and sky. My hand rubs my cheek. Dribble of saline. Blaze of sun.

Smell of warm tarmac. Then here I am. The castle behind me. This time, Ruth's cool as a statue, just the way she should be. I press an icon. I jibber forward at chipmunk speed. I hear myself say *auger* and the trees dance and the clouds behind me billow and race across the sky. Then jump to the superblack jet. Freeze. Play. The air crackles. Too fast, a lack of contrast. Not really as good a shot as some of the others, and here I am again, stupidly clambering up out of the nettles. That's definitely one for the cutting room floor. And on, into the town. The jeeps in the squares. The swish of tires. The smell of the rain. The coaches outside the soccer stadium—a shoot which, almost as I'd expected, actually feels better run through the rain-misted window of a moving car. Ruth's hand is gripping the Merc's door handle hard enough to hurt; but that's easily enough edited out, and it's about the only thing she hasn't got exactly right all day.

I reach the end icon. Ruth turns the suit off and I flap and fumble for the tags to get out of the suffocating dark. The rubberized suit pops and squeals around my flesh, and she comes over to me and lifts the drink that's in her hands, pressing it toward my mouth and hard against my lips, tipping it. I breathe, swallow, breathe. It spills down my throat and her blouse is still open. The whisky tastes odd.

She says, "You can't be sober either."

"I'm not."

The suit, inside out, tumbles to the floor.

"This . . ." She takes the glass, slips off her blouse, touches the scarred and reddened flesh that has formed around the implant jack. "It hurts here."

I touch the plastic.

She says, "I sometimes wish I could escape. . . ."

But where, Ruth? Where? I glance at her eyes before she murmurs to the room to dim the lights. She lies back and the great grey wall glows over us, potent yet unseeing, a cathartic eye. I don't think she's running, but tonight I find that I'm taking notice, altruistic to a fault, seeking out ways and avenues. Me, I'm just the ancillary, the conveyor, and I feel the salt and silk and the slide. Ruth sighs. Ruth laughs. Ruth cries. And all of it comes from a long way away.

I look down at my chest as Ruth moves and see darkening spirals converge, and wonder what it really was that she put in that drink she gave me. She draws me in and over her and yet still I hover far beyond, and I see the scar lines swirl and unravel. Ruth fills the darkness. I see pictures and faces. She's the tattooed man in that story by Bradbury, she's Scheherazade. . . .

Then time hardens. Everything distorts. To hold my moment back, I think of soccer players. I think of the time when there were soccer players. The crowds roar. The coaches arrive. The beaten bodies hang from the goalposts. This time, post coital darkness seems to be coming even before I do. And Ruth's arms and those of millions others slide around me. Now? No. *Now?* Yes, now. Now. . . .

Ruth falls back and I kiss and nuzzle at her shoulder, feeling just the flesh again and the damp slide of her hair though my fingers, wondering where all the rest of it has gone.

"You'll stay?" Her hand traps my shoulder. "You won't go? I don't want to be alone. . . ."

Yes. I'll stay. Or sleep, anyway, until the awkward morning. And coffee? Yes, coffee. I can see Ruth there already as I close my eyes. Another Ruth stepping toward me out of a place where I'm hearing voices and laughter. The sound, through an open doorway, of birdsong and rattling Paris streetcars and a violin. This spring morning that smells of butter, brioche, and coffee.

What was it, Ruth, that you said? Where was the place to be? But you're here now, across this café table, long beads around your neck and your hair bobbed in the modern way, drinking absinthe. This is the place, you say. This is always the place. Ah, I think, Paris in the twenties. The tenements and the cobbled streets, the fountains in the parks, the narrow arches and rickety stairways that lead to the garrets and the lovers. Any moment now, you say, your hand over mine across the table, the scars beneath your flesh like veins of fire, Hem will come in, and Ezra, and Scott and Zelda, and Gertrude, and Pablo. . . .

Here, right now. To be. This is the place.

I open my eyes. The window across the room is now brighter than the screen above the bed, so it must be morning. No birdsong. No gunfire. Ruth's taste in my mouth and something else with it that's hard and bitter. A strand of her hair curled like a faultline down the rucked sheets and the rubberized suit curled up by the bed. We're all reptiles now, shedding our skins.

I sit up. I get up, shivering. Her fresh clothes are in the suitcase and hanging in the wardrobe and her old ones are stuffed in a supermarket bag, and there are signs of her everywhere. Perfumes and painkillers and the sterilizing kit and the vials in the bathroom. I feel more than a hangover as I pull on yesterday's clothes and I know already that it's later than it seems. Out of the window I can see the green-scummed hotel pool and the sun already rising over the mist-steaming hills. This room, even with me standing in the middle of it, seems empty. I look around again, and find my watch, and see the glass she gave me pushed under the bed, white-rimed with the powder she put in it. But the disks are missing, both the main copy, and the backup. And Ruth's gone as well.

Out in the corridor where the smell of stale smoke still hangs, the pink carpet recedes, and music buzzes from a cracked speaker, I run for the lift, thumping the button. Then I take the stairs down.

Me and Tom. Out in the Mercedes with PRESS spray-painted on the sides and roof, driving up through the hills.

"What were we going to do with the story anyway?" he says, still more angry than worried. "We never reached an agreement. . . ."

I say, "Ruth's not a journalist, Tom. Anyway, you know what VARTEL are like, the customers, the shareholders. And isn't the Bonywash a tax-offset subsidiary?"

"Did you tell her that?"

"No."

Tom gives a hollow laugh and swings the Merc close to the edge above the sweeping forest around the wrong side of a bend. The other way, there's no one coming.

He shrugs. "She could have just . . ."

Another bend, and this time we do have to slow. A tank blocks the road. There's the Nationalist symbol painted on the side—that black-on-white logo with a red surround. The tank, I see, is British-built—an old Centurion—and the barrel is pointing pretty much in our direction. But we're on that list they had back at the Holiday Inn. Sure, we've sneaked out—uselessly greased a few palms to find out if anyone has seen Ruth—but that really shouldn't be a problem.

"I've had enough of this," Tom says, pulling on the handbrake and looking up and down the empty road for soldiers. "It's your fucking turn to get out."

"Perhaps we should both . . ."

"What? And ask about Ruth—the donor camp story we're doing on them? And whose car has she got anyway?"

"You know the language, Tom."

"Okay," he sighs, pushing at the door. "But exactly where are we anyway? What's going on here? Who the fuck's in control?"

He climbs out of the Merc and I wind my window down and glance into the open glove compartment to see if he's brought any blow. There's still no one around and the superblack jet has gone out of earshot. I can even hear the trees whispering, the birds singing. Really, there's something about this moment, even with all the worry about Ruth and the wide O of the tank's pointing barrel. It has an intense clarity. It's far better than a suit.

"Hey!" Tom shouts, turning, waving his arms at the motionless tank and the empty road. And I realize as I watch him just how panicked we are about Ruth going missing this morning, just how far off the rails we've gone. "Is there anybody—"

A ripping sound comes from the brush-covered slope on the right side of the road and the driver's window of the Merc sparkles in, then the hood makes a punching sound. A cloud of angry dust marches up the road toward Tom. He looks at it, begins to run, trying to throw himself off the drop to the left even as I slide across the seat, my hand grabbing the

Merc's key, the wheel, engaging the drive, my foot pressing the pedal as I straighten up. The dust dances across Tom and his feet kick from under him. As he falls the bullets move back through, spraying a line across his belly. The Merc's wheels skid and the engine roars as it swerves and turns, as Tom lies crumpled in two bright halves and the dancing dust moves back toward me. But I'm shifting now, banging up over the roadside rocks and a triangular gradient sign that folds even as I glance at it. I'm pulling off fast, accelerating as the windows explode, turning the corner and screaming back toward the town.

I'm standing at a hotel window and looking out across a city at twilight, waiting for the moment of darkness to arrive. High on gantries run the bright cars, intricate as lacework where the old cobbled streets and churches and timbered buildings lean under their protective rainbowed domes, spanning the silver river and the green dark of the forested parks, turning out toward the sunset-pink hills and the far lights of the residential districts. Even though the best of the summer has passed, the air is still heavy with its grassy scent.

I touch the keypad and turn back to face my room, feeling the fall of unlit darkness sweep over my back. There's a real city out there too, but with all these other options I can never quite bring myself to look. This hotel room is smaller than the ones I'd grown used to. After all, things cost more in the world of the gridnet. Money still revolves. It pulses in the wires and in the glowing screens and in the rubberized suit that lies tangled with the sheets of my bed. If the gridnet ever takes life, that's how it will be. Not in the swirl of concepts, images, or emotions, but in the flow of money; an ocean of currency beating graph-jagged rocks under a spreadsheet sky.

But tonight is different. At least, I have something else to do. Of all things, an appointment. After the debriefings at VARTEL and in the clinic beforehand, someone has actually contacted me and suggested we meet. Actually meet. Really an old-fashioned concept these days, but then he's an old—and hence probably old-fashioned—man. For all the fact that he's a VARTEL high-up, he got his shares from his father's father who founded a business punching out washers in some workshop down by the quay. He came to me as I lay in my suit in a cave of blue-white arctic darkness, breathing in the sea sigh and the clash of glaciers and the keening of seabirds, feeling the dense and incredible cold. I shuddered and cried out when the old man's face unfolded above me. He was like God, even with the stretched wattles and dragged out scars and the rheumy bloodshot shatters of his eyes. But it was simply a matter of his having the necessary priority to override my VR privacy. Probably happens all the time here, although me—still more used to things out beyond the gridnet—I'm still a novice. But I'm getting there. I hit the right stuff to prepare myself for the swim beforehand, balance the painkillers and immunosuppressants that I have to take now anyway with the uppers and downers and boosters that I get delivered along the hotel minirail. The kids that deal are easier to meet in a suit now than they are on the street. They're lumbering demons in volcanic landscapes and corpse-eyed angles amid the clouds, horror comic Gods and superheroes—but happy to serve me even if I can't give the vials and ampoules and patches the right names. But these new chemicals work. They work, and I can still feel them sighing and fizzing in me even as I stoop and rise to find my coat and put on my shoes in this tiny me-musty room. Ah, yes. I recognize it now. This must be *here*. This must be *now*. I feel the blood pounding in my head. I see the damp-dribbled ballerina print screwed to the wall above the basin. I feel the scissored ache in my chest that still, at dizzy moments such as this, threatens to unwind, unravel.

So here I am now, out in the street that the lift has taken me to and the hotel at my back is a dark and golden edifice, filled with dreams. A rare car goes by, kicking up a scree of grit, and the pavement on which I'm walking tugs at my feet with fingers of nettle and vine. I pass the shattered frontage of an old mall and hear, under the pale and quietly amazed moon, shouts and laughter from the interior where gnarled palms and lianas of ancient cabling web the glitter of plateglass ponds and escalator waterfalls. They seem to be calling my name, but of course I hobble on. As the graffiti on the walls blurs and pulses and, real and familiar, nostalgic to me as the taste of tea-dipped cake, far-off gunfire cackles over the rooftops, I walk on past the houses that cling to the gated shores of the residential districts where helicopters often hover and—mundane and unexpected as the flash of a cat's eyes—the red spot of a laser sight may dance over you on nights like this, which are all nights now. The tip of a caged helmet, the goggle-gleam of nighteyes, the logoed bulk of a flak jacket. Some guy looming out of the dark and saying, *Just security, Sir*. Just checking for the dreamers inside.

I walk on. A streetlamp still glows. It is a clear, half-cloudy night and the air is oddly clean, billowing with nature now as I pass the stretched wire and the wild untended gardens, the dark windows, the frogspawn swimming pools. There's hardly a taint of diesel or petrol now, not even at the height of what used to be called the rush hour; the flow along the crazed highways is now reduced to a series of solitary events. A car coming, flashing by, a car receding. Once, recently when I was out, I saw a pedestrian coming my way beside the high fences. A woman, a young woman, but otherwise nothing at all like Ruth. Her face was an opalescent glaze, encased in some kind of hood as she walked, watching some other world, and the real one reduced to a small icon inset in the corner.

Here I smell the rising sour tang of the ocean where it reaches the broken warehouses and the beach beyond. A path beside a wall leads me toward the pier which, through the efforts of some failed entrepreneur, still stands against the waves. A old sign for what was once the car park reads LEVEL 4, and I feel a shimmering frisson for a moment as I wonder *if I haven't actually forgotten to leave my hotel. If I'm not still rooted* inside my suit, playing some game.

But there are lights and a gateway, the crackle of ancient litter and, still, a few cars. Cars with tires and wheels and waxed fenders and mortal-threat security lights glowing beneath a great billboard scrolling out attractions and prices of admission. Through it, as if in pale reflection, I can see the ruins of the big dipper and the shattered ferris wheel. No lights blur the sky. There are no screams, no whoops. But still a few people come; enough to keep this place going although—like poor dead Tom's newsprint—it's probably a way of leveling out the profits from something else that's big and new and happening.

People come. Throwbacks and retrogrades, perverts, insomniacs, white-out amnesiacs, pixel epileptics, and even the odd thrill and freakshow seeker. And me. I feel loose and breathless from my walk. The scattered lights and the mildewed wooden houses and the shacks and trailers swirl around me, and there through a door amid the chipped tables beside a serve-yourself machine, is Martin Robertson III, looking lost without his minders, drinking ugly coffee. We're alone in here apart from two green-skinned youngsters whose sex I can't even guess at. They're kicking in the old pinball machine.

Robertson stares at me as I sit down and wait for the sharp tearing to subside in my chest. I stare back, wondering why, even hovering over me in an arctic cave, I could ever have mistaken him for God.

"I'm glad you came," he says.

"I wouldn't miss this. Not if you really have something about Ruth."

"I don't want," he says, "to become over-dramatic about this. I mean, meeting here. . . . It's just that my office." He shrugs inside his expensive jacket. "All those empty floors . . ."

"Who *does* control VARTEL these days, Mister Robertson? Is that what all this is about?"

"No . . ." Almost angry, he waves it away, slopping brown fluid, unnoticed, from his cup. The kids in the corner have upended the machine now. It's pleading *Don't Tilt* in a warm and rounded voice. "The investment decisions, the new production—it's gated to flow and demand. People tire so quickly there'd never be enough time to understand what was going on and make an actual decision. Whole menus go up and down the gridnet in hours. . . ."

I nod. The kids, one of them with a bleeding hand, leave the café. They're laughing at the blood, saying, *It's red, red,* and I wonder if Robertson really has brought me here simply to complain about his plight.

"They're brokering a new peace settlement in Europe," he says. "We've got a negotiating team over there already. If things really do stabilize, it's a big new market."

"You think the wars would stop if you could cable everyone for VR?"

"We have to expand and develop," he says. Then he stands up with a vigor that I find myself envying, and heads out toward the door.

"You won't remember this," he says, snapping a light to his cigar out by the railings along the pier's sea edge. "The last century, there was television. And once you had to turn the thing on half an hour before the icon you'd selected came up for the valves to warm. But we called them programs then, and they were broadcast in realtime, monochrome . . ."

I shake my head, looking down through the gaps in the boards and at the water moving through space beneath. And before that, I know, there were books. And this thing called radio. And I even have an image of people standing around in family groups, singing songs around an instrument called a piano that you made sounds with yourself through some dextrous trick. It was never like that, but Ruth was right in thinking that we all have these visions of the way these things used to be.

"I remember the way the figures used to drift and move," says Martin Robertson III, staring off into a rolling bank of fog. "If you actually see any of that technology now, it's amazing that anyone believed it."

"A hundred years on, people will probably say the same about the crap you put out now."

He nods, although that doesn't seem to be the point he's trying to make. Walking briskly for an old man, he turns away from me along the railing, the glowing point of his cigar zig-zagging as I try to keep up. Big white blocks of styrofoam bob like floes of ice on the water, and a few people are drifting around us, etched against the fuzzy moonlit glow of the city beyond the harbor. They come singly to the fair these days, looking furtive and self-absorbed.

"What I used to like," he says, "was turning the set *off*. This white dot that shrank back across the screen, getting smaller and smaller. I'd huddle in front of the set, trying to keep on seeing it. . . ."

Waves lap at the brick pillars. We're passing a kind of store. Outside, neon-lit and looking like shriveled hides, hang rubberized rows of VR suits. They're cheaper here than you'd get them delivered on the shopping menus, and the sizes go all the way up to beached pizza-guzzling whale, and down—although it still isn't officially legal—to newborn.

"There's still no news about Ruth," he says. "Where she went. What happened to her."

"Did you ever meet her?"

He shakes his head, walking on. "But afterward I ran some of the stuff she'd done. Good, but of course, it's all been downloaded now. It's old stuff, incompatible with this new format we're pushing."

I nod.

"Do you really think," he says, "she just wanted to transmit that donor camp story?"

"It didn't seem just a story to her."

"But still . . ."

"And Tom Moss has gone. I'm the only one left who saw that guy in the castle with the scars."

"You don't still believe that, though . . ." Martin Robertson III exhales and throws his cigar off into the water, a glowing arc ". . . do you?"

"I don't know."

"You saw the recon photos of the old media complex. It's been flattened, bombed. And that escapee you saw in the castle—he'll be gone too. The town's been retaken by the Nationalists, and the word is they'll probably keep it in the settlement."

I look out across the seafront where the half-ruined buildings give way to the dark sleeping town, feeling the pain of the big scar in my chest, and of the little ones in my back where the bullets hit me. For Tom, I keep telling myself, there was nothing anyone could do. I was right to try to keep alive, somehow getting back in the Merc to the Holiday Inn from where a Sikorsky took me to the airport and a NATO Jupiter was waiting, just the way I'd always prayed. For me, being hit really did mean a trip back to gridnet, being held alive cocooned in tubes until I could get to a high-premium hospital with views on the walls that I could switch merely by shifting my tongue. There, they tutted and shook their heads, took out the metal and the splintered bone, and put in something new. Now, of all things, I have a new heart—like the Tin Man, if memory serves and he ever actually got one in that story. And in many ways it is an improvement. It really does ache when I think of Ruth or Tom—or like tonight when I walk too far or get excited. But the rules on these matters are strict. It's pumping inside me. Boom boom. And I really have no idea who it was taken from.

"Will you go back?" Martin Robertson III asks me.

"There are so few people left doing the magazines now. So maybe there's a living left in it."

"What is it that you want to say?"

I shake my head. The tanks. The battles. The drone of flies. It all seems strange. Yet it could happen *here* too. I can even feel it coming, when the swimmers finally awake.

We turn back toward the waterfront.

"Why didn't you just kill me?" I ask. "Pay one of the medics to pull the plugs?"

"You journalists," he chuckles. "Always looking for a conspiracy. Here," he says, "This is all there is. All we've found of Ruth. I'm sorry. . . ."

"Mister Robertson," I say. "I hardly knew her."

He stares at me. Behind him there is mist and the sour scent of the ocean. Carnival darkness. But still he holds out the disk that he has in his hand. Knowing that, whatever it is, I'll take it.

I grab the disk, and I watch as Martin Robertson III walks away. His big limousine starts up at his approach. The lights fan out across the moonscape rubble. Then I, too, turn and walk away. My heart aches. I'm relieved, and I'm disappointed. After all, I'm still a journalist—and with Tom Moss dead, Ruth vanished, part of me was hoping that whoever has shares in this transplant business might have at least tried to frighten me, bribe me off, kill me. That, at least, would have given me something to go after. As it is, I'm still left with just the memory of that day in the castle with the escapee and his VCR. All of it—and Ruth disappearing—seems incomplete, not so much a story as a long tunnel down which I'm still traveling.

But I know that I'll chase it. This story's important to me now. Of course, Ruth was naïve in ever imagining that one story, one fresh and debatable horror, could tip the balance of anything. But it tipped the balance for her, and whatever happened to her has somehow tipped the balance for me. For all I know, she may still be out there. In the coaches or the soccer stadiums, queuing in the rain for gruel, aiming down the sight of a gun, pushing skeleton fingers through rusted wire, or perhaps even lounging on a mine-free beach somewhere, pirating for some foreign sector of the gridnet. Somehow, all these possibilities seem not only equally possible, but equally real. Still, I have one other vision. I see myself getting my accreditation back and wandering the Nationalist capital beneath the non-swastika signs and the big inspirational portraits of their smiling leader, in the markets where the pigeons strut and the streets are still cobbled and unbombed, finding a stall amid the apples and skinned hares and broom handles, one that sells cogs and machinery, computer parts and nightsights that have been torn out from Communist and Christian tanks captured in the recent rout. Seeing amid all this the junction box crab that once sat in Ruth's ribcage, the wires snipped neatly away now and the serial number scrubbed out with acid.

But, as Martin Robertson III said, they're brokering a settlement in Europe now. Things change so rapidly. And, despite all the money my astonished but ultimately compliant insurers paid out, even wet-transplant technology is getting to be old hat. I was wrong, for a start, about VARTEL's interests in this area. Their specialization—obvious when you think about it—is prosthetics. They don't provide real organs, but they do make use of their wet-wire jockey technology to manufacture artificial ones. Silver and silicon and steel—it's the big new wave. So I guess the donor camp story really wouldn't do VARTEL any harm at all, although I don't want their help or backing in breaking it. I've paid to have tissue from my new heart analyzed myself, and I have a clever clinical kit that can identify the donor's near relatives from a mere pinprick of their blood. There's a whole world out there, but the tests say the tissue traits are pure slav-European. So I'll go back first to where all of this started, back to the bombed-out remains of that castle, and what's left of the Holiday Inn. And from there I have hunches and ideas. I have the names of towns and villages, and, if I can really crack this story and survive, I'll be all the proof I need of it myself.

Back in my hotel room, I undress and check my lapel recorder, which worked as well as these things always do nowadays, although it's only picture and a voice, and Martin Robertson III was too canny to actually say anything. I turn the window back on and stare out at the other city, which is bathed in warm summer dark where the stars wink from a sky that's both black and blue. Leaving it running, I feed in the card that Robinson gave me and put on the rubberized suit that smells of me until the sensors override it, and I gaze a the icon that hangs in the darkness. And I lean forward. And I press Run.

There's a green and intricate landscape, glorious in sunlight, flooding below me. The lakes and the farmhouses. The squares of the villages and the fire-stained warehouse roofs and the shell-pocked car parks of the out-of-towns. I have wings. I'm a creature of the air. I can feel the warm bright sky flooding by me. There are mountains in the distance still white with snow, clouds piling up against them for rain as I steer and swoop and the ground races and a road winds before me filled with green-mottled toy machines and soldiers who look up and wave. Then on over the town and the bristling roof of the Holiday Inn and the faded green of the big soccer stadium, out from the cease-fire zone along the wide perfect valley and the shining mud-swollen river, up into the hills.

An icon diamond flashes before me, showing detected movement on the road. Swooping down along the gorge I see a car with PRESS spray-painted on the roof, and two figures scrambling from it in a comic rush whilst a third remains standing in the roadway. Sky and the earth spin as I close in for a closer look. And there's Ruth in sunlight, her head tilted up and gazing right at me as my shadow swoops by. Her face is only there for a moment, but I can tell she's thrilled and enthralled, caught in the perfect moment, gazing up without blinking as the dust and the roar and the heat of this machine blasts over.

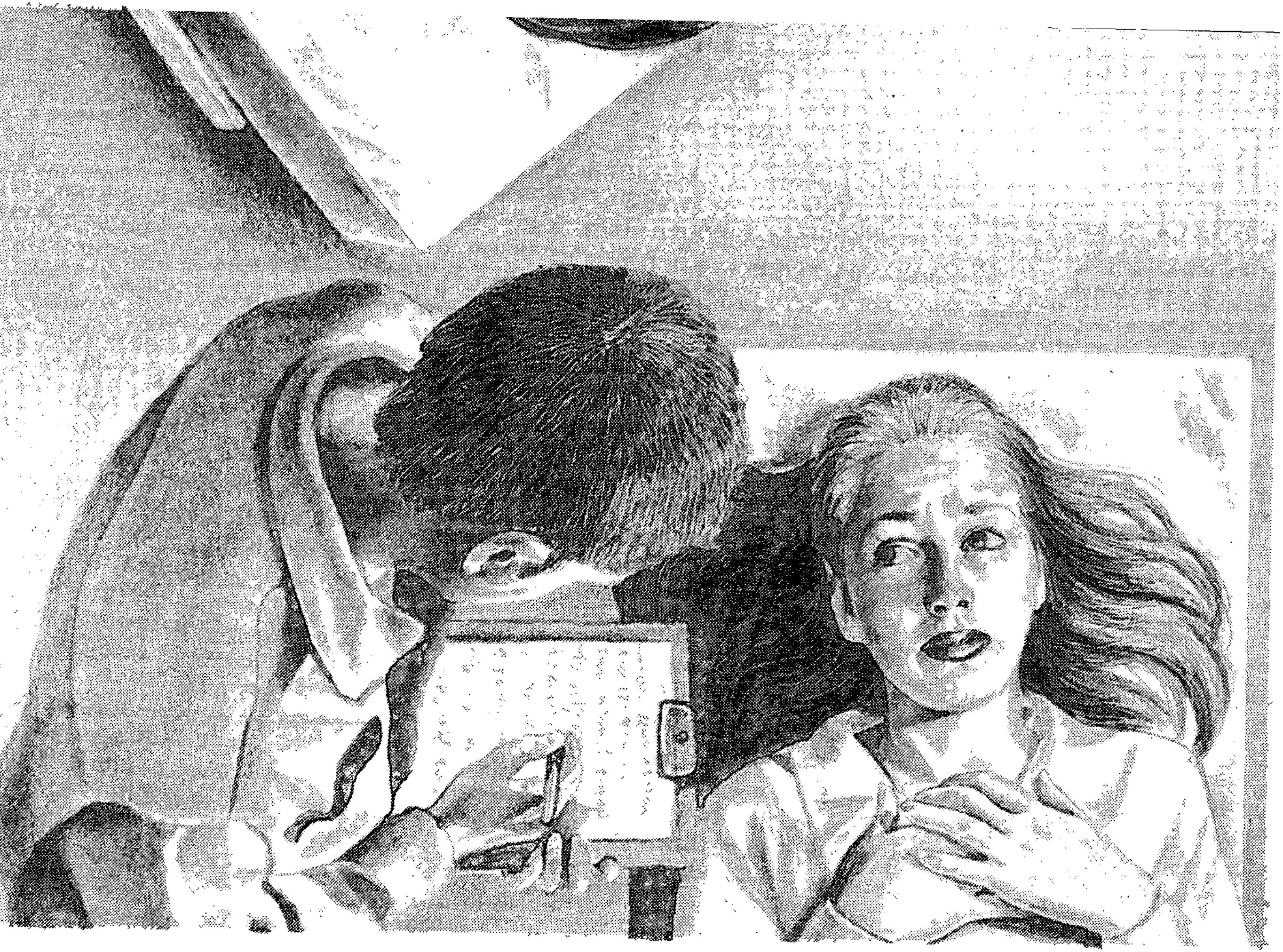
The superblack jet swoops on over the valley and the mountains beyond rise up. There's an icon hovering in a corner of the sky with options to Freeze, Slow, Enlarge, Replay, but I let the program carry me on and through in realtime, in its own way. ●

Steven Utley

THE WIND OVER THE WORLD

Just as the wind from a butterfly's wing may cause major weather disruptions across the globe, the briefest of encounters can cast an unsettling shadow over the rest of one's life.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



The attendant barely looked up from the clipboard cradled in the crook of his arm when Leveritt came in. The room was devoid of personality, but just as she entered through one door, a second man dressed in a lab coat went out through a door directly opposite, and in the instant before it swung shut, she glimpsed the room beyond—brightly lit, full of gleaming surfaces—and heard or thought that she heard a low sound like a faint pop of static or the breaking of waves against a shore. She shuddered as an electric thrill of excitement passed through her.

"Please stretch out on the gurney there." The man with the clipboard continued writing as he spoke. "You can stow your seabag on the rack underneath."

Leveritt did as he said. She said, "I feel like I'm being prepped for surgery."

"We don't want you to black out and fall and hurt yourself." He finished writing, came around the end of the gurney to her, and turned the clipboard to show her the printed form. "This," he said, offering her his pen, "is where you log out of the present. Please sign on the line at the bottom there."

Leveritt's hand trembled as she reached for the pen. She curled her fingers into a fist and clenched it tightly for a second, giving the attendant an apologetic smile. "I'm just a little nervous." She tried to show him that she really was just a little nervous by expanding the smile into a grin; it felt brittle and hideous on her face. "I *did* volunteer for this," she told him. I *am* more excited than scared to be doing this, she told herself.

The attendant smiled quickly, professionally. "Even volunteers have the right to be nervous. Try to relax. We've done this hundreds of times now, and there's nothing to it. Ah!"

His exclamation was by way of greeting a second attendant, so like him that Leveritt felt she would be unable to tell them apart were she to glance away for a moment, who escorted a slight figure dressed in new-looking safari clothes and carrying, instead of the high-powered rifle that would have completed his ensemble, a seabag and a laptop. He stowed the bag and climbed onto the gurney next to Leveritt's without being told, signed the log with a flourish, and lay back smiling. He turned his face toward Leveritt and said, "Looks like we're traveling companions—time-traveling companions!" He talked fast, as though afraid he would run out of breath before he finished saying what he had to say. "Allow me to introduce myself—Ed Morris."

"I'm Bonnie Leveritt."

"Please to meet you, Miz Leveritt—or is it Doctor?"

She wondered if he could utter sentences not punctuated with dashes. "Miz," she said, "working on Doctor. I'm on my way to join a field team from Texas A and M."

One of the attendants consulted his wristwatch and nodded to the other, and each picked up a loaded syringe. The man looming over Leveritt gave her that quick, professional smile again. "This is to keep you from going into shock."

She had no particular horror of needles but turned away, nevertheless, to watch Morris, who lay squinting against the glare of the fluorescent lights. She heard him grunt softly as the needle went into his arm.

"It'll be another few minutes," said Leveritt's attendant. He and his twin left. Leveritt and Morris waited.

After a minute or so, he asked her, "How you holding up?"

"Fine." Her voice sounded strange to her, thick, occluded, like a heavy smoker's. She cleared her throat and spoke the word again; improvement was arguable. "Actually," she confessed, "I'm nervous as hell. This is my first time. It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't have to lie here waiting."

"Supplies go through first—we're down on the priority list, below soap and toilet paper. My first time, I was nervous as hell, too. Nobody gives people in my line of work credit for much imagination. Except—" he made a breathless kind of chuckle "—when it comes to creative accounting. Yeah, I'm one of the bean-counters. But let me tell you—the night before my first time, I didn't sleep a wink. Not a wink. I kept imagining all sorts of things that might go wrong—plus, it all seemed so unreal, it was all so thrilling—and it was going to happen to *me*. Man! Oh, sure, the concept's more exciting than the reality. There's not much to where we're headed—a little moss and a lot of mud. Beats me why they couldn't've made a hole into some more interesting time period."

"I suppose that depends on your definition of interesting. Besides, as I understand it, they didn't make the hole, they sort of found it. We're lucky it didn't open up on somewhere we couldn't go or wouldn't want to."

"You mean, like my hometown—Dallas?"

Leveritt smiled; she was from Fort Worth. "Worse. For all but the few most recent hundred millions of years, the Earth's been pretty inhospitable—poisonous atmosphere, too much ultraviolet light, things like that."

"Spoken like a true scientist!"

"Not quite a full-blown one yet," she said, "but I guess I've got pedantry down."

"Ah. Well, anyway, as I was saying—I was nervous before my first time. Scared, in fact. You might not think it to look at me," and he paused long enough for her to realize that she was now to take a good look at him, so she did, "but I am no shrinking violet. I have a real active lifestyle—mountain climbing, sky diving. I guess I like heights."

Leveritt was willing to give Morris the benefit of the doubt, but he was a balding little fortyish man whom she could not imagine working his way up a sheer rock face. Dressed in his great-white-hunter outfit, he lay clutching the laptop to his narrow chest, drumming his middle, ring, and little fingers on the case. He looked as calm as though he were waiting for an elevator, but he also looked like what he was, an accountant.

"Still," he went on, "it's one thing to jump out of a plane at ten thousand feet—another to jump through a hole in time. Straight out of the twenty-first century—straight into the prehistoric past! So, I didn't get any sleep. The next day, when it came time for me to make the jump, I was a wreck—all because I was scared, see. But I hid the fact I was a wreck—and you know why? Because I was even more scared that if anybody found out, I wouldn't get to make the jump—getting to do it meant that much to me."

Leveritt gave him another, more heartfelt smile. "It does to me, too. But was it rough? The jump itself? I ask everyone I meet who's done it."

Morris screwed up his face and gestured dismissively. "It's no worse'n hitting a speed bump when you're driving a little too fast. Oh, sure, you hear sometimes about people who got bounced around kind of hard, but—speaking from personal experience—I honestly think I could've walked right out of the jump station afterward with nothing more'n a headache and upset stomach. It was nothing. Now I'm less nervous about making the jump than I am about talking funding to this group of entomologists when I get there. Uh, you're not an entomologist yourself, are you?"

"Geologist."

"You ever tried to talk to an entomologist about anything but bugs?"

"Not knowingly, no."

"Then you've never had to pretend to listen to whatever gas some guy wants to vent—"

Leveritt had to laugh. "You obviously have never dated some guys!"

"Ah?" Morris frowned. "No. I sure haven't." Then he got it, or got part of it, anyway, and made another breathless chuckle. "Anyhow, I have to go talk to these entomologists, and they never can—I deal in the definite, see. All they can talk about is the great contributions they're making to science—how vital their work is. I *know* they're making contributions to science—that's why they're there, right? They understand all about bugs. I understand all about money—and never the twain shall meet. . . ."

Leveritt found herself tuning out the sense of the words, but she could not tune out the sound of them. The drugs were taking effect; she wanted to relax and drift, but Morris's voice would not let her. She closed her eyes. Scarcely five seconds later, the attendants suddenly returned, one of them announced, "Time to go, folks," and Leveritt's gurney struck the door sharply as it lurched into motion. The air in the jump station had an unpleasant tang to it. Leveritt saw people moving briskly about, heard them muttering to one another, heard that low sound of static or surf again. A technician seated behind a console said, "One minute to next transmission."

"Doesn't matter which one of us goes through first, does it?" Morris asked his attendant, who answered with a shake of his head. The little man grinned at Leveritt. "Then I'll go first and wait for you on the other side."

"No. Please, I need to get this over with. Let me go first."

"Well, guys—you heard the lady."

Leveritt's attendant pushed her gurney quickly past Morris's, past a metal railing, onto the sending-receiving platform. He lightly touched her arm with the back of his hand. "Have a nice trip."

"Thanks."

"Deep breaths, now," he said as he stepped back off the platform.

"Stand by to send," said the technician at the console. "Five seconds. Four."

Leveritt inhaled deeply.

"Three."

Morris caught her eye through the bars of the railing. She was touched by and grateful for his wink of encouragement.

"Two."

She started to exhale.

Everything turned to white light.

The Navy doctor held her eye open between his thumb and forefinger and directed the beam from a penlight into it. She moved her tongue in her mouth, swallowed, and managed to say, "Where'm I?"

"Sickbay."

"I made it? To the Silurian?"

The doctor put away the penlight. "Now, what do you think?"

Leveritt moved her head experimentally and at once regretted it. When the pain had receded, she carefully took stock. She was still on the gurney. There were exposed pipes overhead and a muffled throb of machinery. The ship, she thought, I'm on the ship, in the Silurian, and after a second or two she realized that she was disappointed. She had wondered if being *in* Silurian time would feel somehow different. Thus far, it felt just like a hangover.

The doctor held up a knuckley finger in front of her face. "I want you to follow my finger with your eyes. Don't move your head."

It hurt her even to think about moving her head again. She watched the finger move to the left and back to the right. She said, "My head's killing me."

"You'll be fine in a little while. You're just a little shaken up. Here." He gave her two aspirin tablets and some water in a paper cup. "Stay on the gurney till those take effect. Then we'll see about getting you up on your feet."

"How soon can I get ashore?"

"We generally like to keep new arrivals under observation for at least six hours." Leveritt groaned when he said that, and he gave her a mildly reproachful look. "You can only get ashore by boat, and the next one doesn't leave until late this afternoon."

"It's just that I've been looking forward to this for so long."

"Uh huh. Well, the Silurian Period's still got five or ten million years to run. You aren't going to miss out on it."

The door opened behind him, and a khaki-clad officer leaned in and asked, "Doctor White, may I talk to her now?" Visible in the passageway was an unhappy-looking man in civilian clothes.

"These gentlemen," said the doctor, "have some questions they want to ask you. Feel up to it?"

Before she could reply, the officer said, "Just a couple of routine questions."

"Sure."

The officer moved quickly toward the gurney with the civilian in tow. Doctor White said, "Miz Leveritt, this is Mister Hales—"

"How do you do?" said the officer, rather too impatiently, she thought.

"—and this is Doctor Cutsinger." The civilian slightly inclined his head in greeting and repeated her name. "The lieutenant is from our operations department. Doctor Cutsinger is one of our civilian engineers."

"Physicist," Cutsinger said, and smiled tightly.

Leveritt tried to sound good-natured. "I was hoping you were the welcoming committee. Isn't anybody going to welcome me to the Paleozoic?" Evidently, no one was. Lieutenant Hales regarded her as though her show of good-naturedness were somehow in poor taste. Cutsinger continued to look unhappy. The doctor nodded at the two men and went out, closing the door behind himself. Leveritt repressed a sigh of bafflement and said, "Well, gentlemen, ask away."

Hales said, "Miz Leveritt."

"Lieutenant?"

He was obviously uncertain as to how to proceed. The lower part of his expression suddenly twisted, rearranging itself into an approximation of a smile; at the same time, a frown intensified the upper part. Considered with his deep-set eyes and hook nose, the effect was ghastly and alarming. Finally, he said, "The, ah, experience of time-travel is never exactly the same for anyone. We like to find out, ah, make a point of finding out how it was for each person each time. Can you describe your experience in detail?"

Leveritt's eyes met Cutsinger's. He blinked and shifted his gaze to a point slightly to the right of her ear. She refocused on Hales and said, "I'm afraid there were no details, just a blinding flash of light."

Hales seemed disappointed by her answer. "What about before the jump? Did anything in the jump station strike you as unusual?"

If you weren't so intense, Leveritt thought, that question would be funny. "It was all unusual to me, because, as you surely must know already, this was my first jump."

"Of course. We want your impressions, though. Anything you can tell us, anything at all. Before the flash of light, when they took you into the jump station—you and Ed Morris. Do you know him well?"

She saw something shift in Cutsinger's face as he glanced at the lieutenant, saw his expression of general unhappiness sharpen into one of very particular contempt. To the oblivious Hales she said, "I don't know him at all. We met a few minutes before the jump, and he talked my ear off. I think you'd do better to ask him these questions. As you surely must also know, Mister Morris'd made at least one jump before this. He can tell you if anything was unusual or not. As for me—" she swung her legs over the edge of the gurney and sat up "—if I'm going to answer any more questions, it's going to be in an upright position."

After a second's hesitation, she slid off the gurney, onto her feet. Cutsinger said, "Are you all right?"

"A little rubbery in the knees, like I just came in off the jogging trail. Otherwise—" She stepped away from the gurney, quickly stepped back, leaned on it for support, admitted, "Still a little wobbly." She locked eyes with the lieutenant. "What is it in particular you're driving at? I somehow can't help feeling you know something and are dying to know if I know it, too."

Hales turned the full force of his grimace on her again, and she realized with a jolt that he now intended it to be a look of reassurance. "As I said, these are just routine questions."

And possibly excepting my six-year-old nephew, you are the worst, the most unconvincing liar I've ever known. She almost said it aloud. What stopped her was the thought of all the time and effort she had put into getting this far—to a room, as she saw it, adjoining the prehistoric past—and how much farther there was to go. Fist on hip, she waited.

Hales, however, clearly was at a loss. He turned to Cutsinger, who, no less clearly, was close to losing his temper. "Anything you can think of to ask her?"

"I told you there was no point to this!"

"I wish to *God,*" said Leveritt, "one of you would tell me what this is all about." Neither man spoke. "Fine. Have it your way. But if I don't get out of this room, I'm going to go insane. The doctor said I wouldn't be able to go ashore for hours, but if you're *through,* I'd at least like to take a look outside. Okay? Please?"

Cutsinger brushed past Hales. He said, "Permit me," and offered Leveritt his arm.

A romantic, she thought, taking it.

"I think," Hales said, "Miz Leveritt had better remain in sickbay."

Not looking back at him, Cutsinger said, "Take a flying leap."

"Master-at-arms!"

A bluejacket with a sidearm suddenly filled the doorway. Cutsinger sighed, shrugged, and said, "Sorry," as he directed Leveritt to a chair.

"I'm sorry, too," said Hales, "but this is a United States Navy ship, and the rules of security are in force. Miz Leveritt, I want you to understand that this interview is confidential."

"So much for the subtle approach!" Cutsinger said sourly.

Hales ignored him. "You're not to repeat any part of our conversation to anybody or make any record of it without express authorization. Any breach—"

"I'm sure she gets the idea, Lieutenant."

"Not at all," said Leveritt. "What am I not supposed to talk about?"

"We have a situation," Cutsinger said quickly, before Hales could open his mouth to answer her, "an unprecedented one, I might add, which is why Hales here's so rattled, why he's handling it in such a ham-handed manner. Ham-headed, too." The lieutenant's mouth did open now, in a threat display. Cutsinger met it with a glower and continued talking. "About all he's really going to accomplish by invoking security is to make it impossible for you to do the work you came here to do."

Leveritt gave Hales an even look. "I didn't come all this way just to fight the Navy."

"There're some thousands of people living and working here," said Hales, "and in the interest of general morale, we have got to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading and panic from breaking out."

"You're the one who's panicked! Either leave her alone or tell her. She'll hear all about it soon enough."

"Don't underestimate Navy security," Hales said stiffly.

That elicited a harsh laugh from Cutsinger. "I bet you anything it was all over the ship inside of five minutes. I bet you it's already gotten ashore, some version of it, anyhow. All you're doing is putting Miz Leveritt in a very awkward position. She'll be the only person in the whole expedition who won't have an opinion on what everybody else is talking about."

"Master-at-arms, Doctor Cutsinger is needed back at the jump station."

"Aye, aye, sir." The bluejacket stepped to Cutsinger's side.

"Tell her," Cutsinger said over his shoulder as he went out, "for God's sake, *tell* her."

The bluejacket closed the door behind himself, and Hales said, "Well." He looked at Leveritt; his features relaxed; he almost smiled a real smile. "Please accept my apologies on Doctor Cutsinger's behalf. As a civilian aboard a Navy ship, he naturally finds working under Navy supervision irksome at times."

"By supervision, do you mean armed guard?"

"I mean—I am not a martinet or a horse's patoot." He took a step toward the door. "Please come with me. I have enough to worry about without you going insane."

He led her down the passageway and opened a heavy steel door at the end of it. As Leveritt stepped through the doorway and onto a catwalk, a breeze touched her face and ruffled her hair. Her first, quick 180-degree survey took in the fact that the ship and some lesser vessels lay off a rocky coast. She gripped the railing with both hands and inhaled the scent of sea salt and the faintly oily smell of the ship. From a deck overhanging the catwalk came the sounds of a helicopter warming up its motor and spinning its blades. Below, waves smacked noisily against the hull. The mid-morning sun was behind the ship, in whose great angular shadow the water was blue-black, almost slate-colored. Close by, two auxiliary craft rode at anchor, and beyond them a glittering expanse of blue-green water stretched to a line of sea cliffs. Even as she stared, transfixed by the sight of that shore, another, even smaller craft—not a Navy vessel at all, but a sailboat—came into view around the headland. Against the somber cliffs, its sail looked like a blazing fire. "Oh, my." She breathed the words.

Hales had followed her onto the catwalk. He rested his elbows on the railing and did not look at her when he spoke. "Doctor Cutsinger did tell me there'd be no point in questioning you. If there'd been any way to find out what we need to know without actually asking you. . . ."

She realized after a moment that what he was saying must be important, but it took an effort of will to turn her attention from the Silurian vista, and she was scarcely able to say, "I beg your pardon?"

"He also talked me out of sending you right back to the twenty-first century. He *may* have talked me out of confining you to the ship until we get this, this situation straightened out."

Now Leveritt could not take her eyes off him. "I swear to you, I don't know anything and won't talk to anybody about anything. Please just let me go off into the hinterlands and collect rocks like I'm supposed to."

Hales almost smiled again. "He said I'm treating everyone here like children. I'm not trying to, I'm really not. I see his point." He made a gesture that seemed meant to take in everything around them. "This is the greatest thing since the moon landings, and a lot less exclusive. Every single person here, Navy as well as civilian, wants to be here and volunteered to be here. Doctor Cutsinger's view is, we're all grownups and deserve to be told the truth like grownups. All the truth all the time."

Leveritt asked, "And what's your view?" and when he did not answer immediately, "Or doesn't the Navy let you have one?"

"Right the second time. All of us here, we're an extension of our nation. There're all these little communities of scientists scattered about, and there's the Navy, delivering supplies, providing transport, holding things together. The Silurian Earth's a United States possession, Miz Leveritt, American territory, and the Navy's here to guard our national interests. It is in the national interest that the Navy decides what is classified matter. Only persons who need to know about classified matter to perform an official job for the Navy are entrusted with the information. That's rule number one, and it leaves you out. Rule number two is, persons to whom classified matter is entrusted are responsible for protecting it against unauthorized disclosure. That hems me in."

"Fine. What're you going to do with me?"

"Escort you back to sickbay. Later, I hope, see you on your way to go collect rocks."

It was late in the short Silurian day when Hales guided Leveritt through the ship to the boat bay. From a platform above that noisy grotto, she watched as the last supplies were loaded, then, with a nod to the lieutenant, descended to the boat. The coxswain helped her aboard. Hales surprised her by climbing down after her. He gave no sign that he heard her when she asked, "Are you going to keep watch on me from now on?" She found a seat amidships; he gave her a nod as he took the one next to hers but said nothing.

She was too excited, however, to resent his presence. She had had sleep, a shower, and her first food in almost twenty-four hours, and the morning's frustrations and mystifications were falling away behind her. When she ran her eye over the neatly stowed boxes and crates, the words BATHROOM TISSUE prompted something too fleeting to be called a memory. The bay's gates opened. Leveritt looked up, caught a glimpse of someone who could have been Cutsinger on the platform, and glanced at Hales to gauge his reaction. His attention, though, was directed forward rather than upward. The boat slid out, sliced across the ship's lengthening, darkening shadow, and emerged suddenly into sunlight. She gazed shoreward, at the drowned valley's rocky walls, and felt that at last she truly was entering Paleozoic time. Not even the sight of the pier, jutting out from the near shore below a cluster of Quonset huts and tents, dispelled the feeling. She spared the ship a single backward glance. Everything in its shadow, everything aboard it, contained by it—even the air circulating through it and the seawater sloshing within the confines of its boat bay—belonged to the twenty-first century. She looked shoreward again and thought of the great steel monster no more.

Several boats, including a tiny blue-hulled sailboat, were tied up at the pier. Indistinct human figures waiting there gradually resolved themselves into a small party of Navy men in tropical khakis and two civilians who stood apart both from them and from each other. Both civilians wore white suits, but one man was short, stout, and sunburnt, and the other was tall as well as thickset, tanned rather than burnt, and had a Panama hat with a purple hat band set at a rakish angle atop his squarish head. It was clear from his bearing that he considered himself to be a vision. Leveritt laughed when she saw him, waved, and called out, "Rob! Rob Brinkman!"

Brinkman waved back, and when the boat had been tied up he reached down and offered Leveritt his enormous brown hand. She was a medium-sized woman, heavier in the hips than she cared to be, but he seemed to lift her right out of the boat and onto the pier with only minimal assistance from her. His grin and voice were as big as the rest of him. "Welcome to the Silurian!"

Leveritt hugged him. She could not quite encircle his torso with her arms. "It's about *time* someone here said that to me. What a suit! What a hat! Is this what you wear on collecting trips now?"

"Only if pretty grad students are going along."

Behind her, somebody peevishly said, "I'm supposed to meet Ed Morris. I'm Michael Diehl, from the San Diego Natural History Museum."

As Brinkman stepped around Leveritt to ask a bluejacket to hand up her gear, she saw the other civilian peering anxiously into the boat, as though he expected to spot Ed Morris trying to hide from him among the cargo. The party of Navy men had got immediately to work unloading the boat, and their interest in Diehl did not extend beyond his keeping out of their way. Hales, however, introduced himself and said, "I regret that Mister Morris is unable to come ashore at this time."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Side-effects of the jump."

"Oh. Well, you could've radioed that piece of information and saved me an hour's wait for nothing. Could've saved yourself a boat ride, too."

Hales noticed Leveritt watching him. He favored Diehl with a mild version of his frown-above, smile-below expression. "Boat rides're what the Navy's all about."

Brinkman turned with Leveritt's seabag on his shoulder and said, "Okay," and the two of them walked away. The pier came straight off the camp's main thoroughfare, which was paved with metal matting and lined with huts. Tents had been erected along intersecting streets. There was a good deal of pedestrian traffic, both civilian and Navy. Brinkman led Leveritt past supply, generator, and administration buildings, the dispensary, the exchange, the mess—"the Navy part of camp," he told her, adding, "But we get to use the facilities, of course." Civilian personnel lived in and worked out of a group of tents he called the suburbs. "Our people're already upriver, so, tonight, you'll be the guest of a bunch of centipede enthusiasts."

"How charming."

"It'd probably be a good idea to shake out your shoes in the morning. Want some dinner?"

"I think all I want tonight," she said, "is to walk a little way past the last row of tents, where I can see pure and unadulterated Paleozoic."

"Care for a guide?"

She gave him a sidelong mock-wary lock. "Not if it's some notorious lady-killer in an ice-cream suit."

Brinkman laughed. "Just make sure you keep the camp on your left when you go out, or you'll wind up in the marsh. And don't go out too far, either. And don't stay up too late."

"Yes, Mother."

"We leave right after breakfast, and around here breakfast is at sunrise."

He showed her where she was to spend the night. None of the centipede enthusiasts was about, so Leveritt put her seabag just inside the door, bade him good night, and with no further ado set out on her walk. Not far beyond the last row of tents, the ground rose sharply; the going was not especially rough, but she did not push her luck—the sun was sinking fast, and she did not fancy making her way across unfamiliar ground in the dark. Just as she reached a ledge from which she could look down into the camp, a thin bugle call announced the commencement of the evening colors ceremony. Electric lights illuminated the camp, and she had no trouble spotting the flagpole. There came a second bugle call, followed by the national anthem. The flag sank slowly out of sight behind a Quonset hut. Out on the water, the shadow of the Earth itself swallowed up the ship. Leveritt sat down on warm smooth rock, lay back to look up at the purpling, then blackening, sky, and finally felt herself part of Silurian reality, *in* Paleozoic time and space. Contentment filled her.

How long she remained thus, she did not know. The moon rose, the unrecognizable stars slightly shifted their positions. Eventually, she became aware that the rock had cooled without getting any softer. She got up and walked slowly toward camp. As she came among the tents, she heard voices and music from some of them and noticed that traffic had thinned. No insects orbited the lights, unexpectedly reminding her that no birds had wheeled and screeched over the bay. She knew, of course, that the Silurian was too early for birds and insects—flying insects, at least—but until this moment she had not appreciated their absence.

Just before she reached her tent, she saw Michael Diehl approaching. His face held a sickly cast, and he appeared to have his entire attention focused on the ground before him. When she started to go inside, however, he called out, "Excuse me, these tents're reserved for the San Diego Natural History Museum."

"Rob Brinkman said there's an extra cot. He's the—"

"Brinkman. Texas A and M." Diehl was near enough now for her to catch a whiff of what he breathed out. His red complexion, she decided, was not wholly the result of too much sun.

"We're on our way upriver in the morning," she said, "so it'll only be—"

"You're the woman who came in on the boat with Lieutenant Hales. Leveritt, isn't it?"

"Yes. And your name's Diehl. Look, if there's a problem, I'm sure Doctor Brinkman can—"

"You made the jump this morning. With Ed Morris."

"Yes." She said it quickly and said no more, not wanting to be cut off again.

Diehl glanced to left and right. "I think you'd better come with me. I know where we can have a drink and talk in private."

"Um, thank you for the offer, but I'm very tired, and I need to—"

"You're the only one I can talk to about what's happened to Ed Morris!" There was a note of pleading in the whiskey-scented voice. "And I'm the only one *you* can talk to."

"What? What's happened to Ed Morris?"

Diehl looked closely at her. "You don't know? No, I can see you don't. You didn't really see it happen. I guess nobody really saw it. And Hales didn't tell you, did he? No, of course he didn't. He laid that Navy security stuff on me, too. Tried to hand me some crap, and when I raised holy hell and threatened to go straight to his commanding officer—"

"*What* about Ed Morris?"

"There was an accident! Come on, let's go where we can talk. We're too close to the Navy here."

She hesitated as he walked past, got as far into a protest as "I don't think I'm supposed," then followed him back the way she had just come, up the slope behind the camp, to the ledge. Diehl wiped the mouth of a small flask on his coat sleeve and offered it to her. She declined to accept. He took a drink, gasped, and replaced the screwtop.

"Ed Morris," he said, "didn't come through the hole today like he was supposed to."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Hales told me—after I made him tell me—Morris made the jump one minute after you, but he never arrived here. He's gone. Lost."

"Gone, lost—where?"

Diehl shook his head. "They don't know."

"But—"

"They don't *know!* They honestly don't. Maybe it was some glitch in the machinery that did it, or sunspots. Maybe some quirk of the hole itself, something they don't know about. I frankly don't think they know much more about the hole now than they did in the beginning."

"But how do you *lose* somebody?"

"You gotta remember what a strange thing the hole is. When they first stumbled across it, all they knew was, here's this strange thing. This anomaly. They sent in robot probes to get specimens, photograph everything in sight. By and by, they figured out what they had was this doorway into the past. But it didn't just open up on *a* place on *a* day. It wasn't that stable. There was a sort of flutter, and it caused what they call spatial drift and temporal spread. So, two probes might go through together on our side, the twenty-first-century side, but come out miles and years apart on the Silurian side. That's why they built the jump stations. They built one of them aboard that ship and pushed the ship through the hole so they could keep things synchronized on both sides of the hole. It all worked perfectly, until today. Today, Ed Morris may've been plunked down anywhere. Far inland or far out to sea. He may've arrived a hundred years ago or a hundred years from now."

"Alive?" She was barely able to ask it.

"Not for long. Not unless he's a helluva lot smarter and luckier'n Robinson Crusoe. And if he was hurt—"

"How awful. That poor man."

"If he was really lucky, he never knew what happened. Never felt a thing. Hales says he may just've been scattered across four hundred million years."

Leveritt felt a chill of horror, though she could not have said what being scattered across four hundred million years might entail.

"He says everything's working again," Diehl went on, "they're sending and receiving again, but until they figure out what went wrong—" he abandoned the sentence to take another drink. "Everything we use here, food, supplies, it's all gotta come through the hole. And the hole—"

Leveritt knew what he was about to say and said it for him. "The hole's the only way home."

"You got that right! The only way!"

She looked upward. The moon was slightly higher in the sky than when she had seen it—how long before? Half an hour? Then, she had experienced a happiness greater than any other she could remember. Now, she felt oppressed, weighed down.

They were silent for almost a minute. Then, as Diehl tilted his head back to drink, Leveritt said, "Well, what can we do about it?"

Diehl smacked his lips. "Indeed, what? Doesn't seem right. It *isn't* right. A man dies, vanishes—whatever's applicable in this case. He's got no family or friends far's I can find out, and there's nothing to bury. And nobody's supposed to talk about him, so he won't even get a memorial service. Not even if he did have family and friends."

"Mister Diehl, I don't think we should—"

"It isn't right! Know what really sets us apart from the animals? Never mind what religion says about souls. Souls're just puffs of air. The only thing makes a man's death meaningful is remembrance. Without remembrance, he's just a wind that blew over the world and never left a trace."

"Mister Diehl! I don't think we should talk about him anymore. I don't think we should meet again, either."

"Huh? Why not?"

"If Lieutenant Hales finds out we've had this conversation and that I know about Ed Morris—"

"To hell with Hales! Don't be scared of him, stand up to him like I did!"

"He may not be able to make trouble for you," Leveritt said impatiently, "but I think he can make a lot for me. It's already occurred to him to either send me back home or lock me up. Will you give me your word you won't let him find out?"

"Bastard's not gonna hear a thing from me. And if you're upriver, he can't bother you any."

"I wish I could be sure of that. I'm—listen, from the moment I learned about the hole, I wanted to join this expedition. I worked hard to get here. Now that I *am* here. . . ."

Her voice trailed off in a sob; her throat constricted as she sensed impending, insupportable loss, and tears gathered on her eyelashes. She clenched her jaw and fists and held on, somehow, to her composure. Beside her, Diehl coughed and said in his thickened voice, "Still some left, how 'bout it?" and when she had blinked away the tears, she saw him holding the flask out to her again.

"No," she said, "thank you."

"You ever drink?"

"Hardly ever."

"Same here," and he raised the flask to his lips.

"Well," she said, and went carefully down the slope and directly to her tent. The camp had grown quiet, and most of the electric lights had been extinguished. A middle-aged woman answered her knock and let her get barely one sentence into an explanation before inviting her inside and introducing herself as Carol Hays.

"Rob Brinkman met me in the mess tent," Hays said, "and told me to expect you. Sorry nobody was here earlier, but we were probably still sluicing the mud off ourselves. We've been slogging around in the marsh all day."

Leveritt let Hays introduce her to a sleepy-looking young woman. She instantly forgot the woman's name but managed to smile and say, "Doctor Brinkman told me you're centipede enthusiasts."

Hays made a mock-horrified face and then laughed, and the young woman, affecting a tolerably good Dixie-belle drawl, said, "We have *found* that gentlemen do not look at us quite so *askance* if we refer to ourselves as entomologists."

Did either of you know Ed Morris? Leveritt wanted to ask. She was grateful that they were very tired and not such good hosts that they would stay awake on her account.

Soon, on her cot, in the dark, she lay listening to their soft, regular breathing and trying to resist falling immediately asleep. She had realized as soon as she laid her head down that she was exhausted, but she felt herself under an obligation, at the end of a day she regarded as the most momentous of her life, to spend some time sifting through its events, analyzing and categorizing, summing up. She could not, however, keep everything straight on the ledger page before her mind's eye; Ed Morris kept shoving everything else aside. Then, when she thought pointedly about what must have happened to him, her imagination was drawn not to visions of accidents resulting in death, but to one of a human figure stretched like a rubber band from the top of the geologic column toward an indefinite point at the mid-Paleozoic level. The figure was alive. It writhed across almost half a billion years.

She recoiled from that image, and another promptly presented itself: Ed Morris as a straight line continually approaching a curve but never meeting it within finite distance.

But perhaps, she told herself, he met a real death instead of some exotic asymptotic fate. Perhaps he's at the bottom of the bay. . . .

If I'd let him make the jump before me, it would've been me who . . .

And Morris might've been sitting out there with Diehl tonight, trying to think of something to say about a person he'd barely known for five minutes.

Or maybe not. Diehl wouldn't even have known who Morris was talking about. . . .

She awoke remembering no dreams. The sky had only begun to lighten; she showered and dressed and was packed and waiting to go when Brinkman came for her. He wore old khaki now, and a hat that needed blocking. After a quick breakfast, they went directly to the pier. There was fog enough so that, viewed from the pier's end, the camp seemed obscured by curtains of gauze. Nothing could be seen of the vessels in the bay.

Leveritt and Brinkman stepped aboard the boat that was to carry them upriver. There was no ceremony, no one to see them on their way, and they were the only passengers. They sat under a white canopy and drank coffee from a thermos bottle as the lines were cast off and the boat nosed into the current. Pier and camp receded and were soon lost from sight; by the time the fog lifted, they lay behind a bend in the river. The view from the boat was of barren heights and marshy borders. Dense Lilliputian forests of primitive plants covered the low, muddy islets. At length, Brinkman put his face close to Leveritt's and said, "Hello."

She started, drew back, looked at him in astonishment.

"I said hello, Bonnie. Before that, I said I think it's going to be a beautiful day." He aimed a finger vaguely skyward. "You know, dazzling blue sky, fleecy white clouds."

"Sorry. I must've—I was in a trance."

"I'll say."

She nodded toward the marsh. "I guess I've probably seen nearly every documentary ever made about the Silurian. But I never imagined how quiet it is here. Life on Earth hasn't found its voice yet. Hasn't hit its stride." She broke into a grin. "I think I'm quoting from one of those old documentaries."

"I doubt it," said Brinkman. "I bet everybody here is secretly, mentally narrating a documentary every second of the day."

The boat bisected the silent world. Brinkman pulled his hat down over his eyes, folded his arms, and slept. After a time, Leveritt realized, and was by fast turns surprised and appalled to realize, that the vista bored her.

It can't be! she thought in panic.

It isn't, she thought a moment later. It's something else. I'm distracted. By Ed Morris.

Leveritt sprawled on her cot, arms and legs dangling over the edge because she could not bear her own blistering touch. It was a hot evening and humid, so sticky that her face stung and her T-shirt and boxer shorts adhered to her skin, pasted to it with perspiration. Her tentmate, Gilzow, lay on the other cot, a wet handkerchief over her face. The flaps were drawn at both ends of the tent; from time to time, the air between the two women stirred discreetly, trying, it seemed to Leveritt, to attract as little attention as possible when it did so.

Finally, she delivered herself of a theatrical groan to signal that she was giving up on the notion of falling asleep. She sat up, lit the lantern, and wiped her face and throat with a damp cloth. She said, "And I thought Texas summers were miserable."

Through her handkerchief, Gilzow said, "Look at the bright side. No mosquitoes. No fire ants, either."

"But no shade trees to sit under, and no grass to sit on. And no watermelon to eat out on the grass, out under a tree."

Gilzow lifted a corner of the handkerchief and peeked out. "You know what'd really be nice right now? Cold beer. Not that awful Navy stuff, I mean, *real beer*. Fine, manly beer so cold it's got ice crystals suspended in it. Or rum and Coke, in a big tall glass, with lots of ice cubes. Mm hmm. Cool us off and render us insensible at the same time." She let the corner of the handkerchief fall back into place. "I cannot believe there isn't a drop of anything to drink in this whole camp."

"Well, at least we can get Cokes and ice at the supply tent."

Gilzow sighed, barely audibly above the lantern's hiss. Then she plucked the handkerchief off her face and sat up. "I'm willing to forego insensibility," she said, "if I can only cool off. Just let me find my sandals."

Leveritt slipped outside and waited, listening. The camp was on a low bluff overlooking the river valley. Behind the bluff was a rocky flatland extending to distant hills. By day it stood revealed in all its stark desolation; nothing moved on the plain that wind or rain did not move, for only down in the valley, along the river's winding course, was there life. Between sunset and sunrise, the flatland lay vast and black, as mysterious as sea depths, while the night resounded with the cracking of cooling rocks.

Gilzow emerged. Theirs was the one undarkened tent, and the sky was overcast, but the obscured full moon cast enough light for them to see their way through the camp. No one else was about. The tents were open, however, and out of them came snatches of conversation, murmurings about heat and humidity and the day's work and the next day's prospects. When they overheard a man say, "Roger, where's that *rain* you predicted?" they paused, Gilzow literally in mid-step, balanced on one foot, until Roger answered, "I think the rainclouds must've gotten themselves snagged on those jumbly old hills." Leveritt walked on, Gilzow hopped and skipped to catch up, and her soft laughter hung in the unmoving air.

"Jumbly old hills!" She glanced back over her shoulder at the tent. "I don't think Roger's actually supposed to be doing what he does. I think he's a meteorologist who got lost on his way to becoming a poet."

"Listen to you!"

"It's true. He once showed me some poems he'd written, and I memorized one of them." Gilzow stopped walking, struck a pose, and recited:

"Australopithecus' sleep
is fitful, for it seems
that Australopithecus
isn't used to having dreams."

"That's not poetry," Leveritt said, "it's doggerel. And besides, I'm sure australopithecines could—"

"Oh, get a sense of humor, Bonnie."

Stung, Leveritt opened her mouth to reply, but no retort occurred to her.

"Sorry, Bonnie." Gilzow sounded sincerely contrite. "This heat and humidity—"

"It's okay," Leveritt said stiffly. "It's—I'm a born pedant."

On their way back from the supply tent, carrying a cooler between themselves and each holding an opened soft drink by its throat in her free hand, they came upon two men. Gilzow said, "Mike, Roger."

Mike Holmes and Roger Ovington turned, and the former said, "Hi, Lou. Bonnie. Hot enough for you?"

"Blah. About that rain, Roge."

"Paleozoic weather's as capricious as Cenozoic." Ovington nodded toward the hills. "But it's coming. We just saw some lightning flashes way off on the horizon."

"Bonnie 'n' I're going to have to drown our sorrows in straight Coca-Cola unless somebody around here's got some rum or something he'd consider swapping for bizarre sexual favors."

"Sorry," said Holmes, "sorrier than I know how to tell you," and he gave a little laugh obviously intended to show that he might not be kidding. Gilzow laughed, too, to show that she definitely was. Leveritt could only marvel at her tentmate's self-possession. She herself could think of nothing to say, could think nothing, in fact, except, We're all four of us standing here in our underwear.

"Well," Gilzow said, "come sit on the cliff with us anyway. We also grabbed some crackers and a can of chicken salad."

"Then stand back, girls," Holmes said, "because we take big bites."

They sat among the rocks at the edge of the bluff and dangled their feet over an inky void—by night, the valley was abyssal. They ate and spoke of nothing in particular. All four of them started at a very loud pop of fracturing rock, and Ovington said, "It doesn't take much imagination to populate the darkness here with giant crustacean monsters clacking their claws."

Gilzow leaned close to Leveritt and said in a low voice, "I rest my case."

Holmes said to Ovington, "Sometimes you are a weird person."

Ovington laughed. "To me, prehistoric still means big ugly monsters. Hey, I'm just a weatherman, okay? I can't tell a psychophyte—what is it?"

"Psilophyte," said Gilzow.

"I can't tell a psilophyte from creamed spinach. To me, a trilobite's just a waterlogged pillbug. And it doesn't matter what time period I'm in, meteorology's the same here as it is back home. Trade winds blow from the east, a high-pressure system's still—everything's *different* for the rest of you."

"Not for me and Bonnie," said Holmes. "Rocks is rocks."

"Still." Ovington gestured at the overcast sky. "The *Milky Way's* different, yet it looks the same to me here as it does back home. One of the astronomers told me once that in the time between now and the twenty-first century, our little solar system is going to make almost two complete trips around the rim of the galaxy."

"You try to imagine that," Leveritt said quietly, "but you just can't."

"When I was a kid," said Gilzow, "I drove myself just about nuts trying to deal with geologic time and cosmic immensity. I started collecting models of geologic time, copying them out of science books and science fiction novels, into a notebook. I must've ended up with a couple or three dozen. Like, if the Earth's age were compressed into twelve months, or twenty-four hours, or sixty minutes. Or how, if you put a dime on top of the world's tallest building, the height of the building would represent the entire age of the Earth, and the thickness of the dime would represent how long humans've been around."

"I like that one," Ovington said, and laughed. "I like it a lot!"

"My favorite," said Holmes, extending both arms out from his sides, "has always been the one my dad taught me when I was ten. The span of my arms, he said, was how long life had existed on Earth. And all of human history and prehistory fit on the edge of my fingernail."

"Dang," said Gilzow, "where's my notebook?"

They fell silent. Minutes passed, irregularly punctuated by the sounds of splintering rock and faint, unmistakable thunder.

"Do you suppose," Leveritt said suddenly, and tried to keep herself from asking the question that had been forming in her for weeks, since the night before the boat had brought her from the camp on the estuary, tried to make herself stop, but it had to come out now, had to, now, "do you suppose that if somebody came from the twenty-first century and died here in the Silurian, he'd cease to exist back in the future?"

The others' faces turned toward her. She could not see their expressions clearly but did not think she needed to see them to imagine their collective thought, What a truly *stupid* question!

Holmes said, "Whoa," but not sarcastically, and then, "Run that by me again."

Encouraged, she said, "I mean, would that person still be born and grow up to come back through time and die four hundred million years before he's born? Or would he be erased from existence? Would he have never been?"

"Actually," said Ovington—it was, Leveritt realized with gratitude, his kind of question—"there's a story about someone who decided to tackle that very matter. This was back in the early days of the expedition, when everybody was jittery about creating paradoxes. All this person did was bring back some lab animals and kill them."

"What happened?" Leveritt said.

"Nothing happened. You could say the experiment annihilated the animals but didn't annihilate them from having been. Or so the story goes. It may not be a true story."

"What if—" Leveritt cut herself short. What if what? What if somebody were to be scattered across four hundred million years, what then? "Nothing. Never mind."

Gilzow turned back to Ovington. "What you're saying, if that story's not true, is that the matter *hasn't* been settled."

"Well, by now, it surely has. People've been in Paleozoic time long enough."

"Long enough, anyway," said Holmes, "so nobody can tell the true stories from the weird rumors. All these myths're building up. Everybody repeats them, nobody knows if there's anything to them or not. Like the one about the government's secret plan to dump reactor waste in the Silurian."

"Actually," Ovington said, "the way I heard that story, if it is the same story, is that some generals tried to figure out a military application for a hole into the Silurian. Their plan was to sow Eurasia and Gondwanaland with nukes, so, later on, whenever the infidels and darkies got out of line—"

Holmes guffawed, and Gilzow said, "It's got to be true!"

"No," said Holmes, "it can't be, it's too stupid."

"It's so stupid it *has* to be true."

"Maybe it is," said Ovington, "and maybe it isn't, but this much is certain—the United States isn't sharing the hole with anybody!"

Then, Leveritt thought, there's the story about the man who jumped through—into? across?—time and never came—out? down? Anyway, he vanished as though he'd never been. No one could tell he'd ever been, because nobody was supposed to talk about him.

And there's a woman in the story who worked hard to get someplace, do something, be somebody. She found true happiness for maybe a whole hour. Afterward, she kept wondering what had happened to it, what had gone wrong. She was no quitter, never had been, but her work somehow wasn't as fulfilling as she'd expected, and everyone around her thought she was a humorless prig.

But those were just symptoms. The problem—

Thunder rolled across the flatland, louder than before. Leveritt looked and saw a lightning-shot purple sky. The air suddenly moved and grew cool, eliciting a duet of *ahs* from Gilzow and Holmes and a full-throated cry of "*Yes!*" from someone in camp. Ovington rose and shouted in that direction, "I *told* you it was coming!" To the others on the bluff, he said, "Gotta run, work to do," and rushed off.

"Guess we'd better go batten down," said Holmes.

"Just toss everything into the cooler," Gilzow told him. "Bonnie 'n' I'll clean it up later."

He did as she said, and then they picked up the cooler between themselves and hurried away.

Leveritt did not follow. The problem, she sat thinking, really was that the woman thought she was in a different story, her own, instead of the one about the man who vanished. Every time she turned around, there was his ghost. She couldn't make him go away. There was no place else for him to go, no one else who would take him in. No one else knew who he was because she wasn't supposed to talk about him.

Stop haunting me, Ed Morris. Stop.

The first heavy raindrop struck Leveritt on the back of the hand. She got to her feet and found herself leaning into a stiffening wind, squinting against airborne grit, in some danger of being either blown off the bluff or else blinded and simply blundering over the edge. She saw a bobbing point of light that had to be a lantern and concentrated on walking straight at it.

The rain started coming down hard. She found her tent, but as she bent to duck under the flap, she smelled ozone and felt a tingling all over her body, a mass stirring of individual hairs. Everything around her turned white, and she jerked back. For a timeless interval, she saw or imagined that she could see every upturned, startled face and wrinkled square inch of tent fabric in camp, every convolution of the roiling clouds above, everything between herself and the faraway hills, every rock, every fat drop of water hurtling earthward. At an impossible distance from her, yet close enough for her to see his safari garb and the dark flat square object he held, was a slight man whose expression both implored and accused.

The thunderclap smashed her to the ground. She came up on hands and knees, blinded, deafened, screaming, "I *remember* you, goddammit, what do you *want?*"

Strong hands closed around her wrist and forearm and dragged her out of the rain. Someone wiped her face with a cloth. At first, she could see nothing and heard only a ringing in her ears. Gradually, she made out Gilzow's face, saw the look of concern, even alarm, in her wide blue eyes, saw her lips move and heard the sound of her voice though not the words she spoke. Leveritt shook her head. Gilzow stopped trying to talk to her and unselfconsciously helped her remove her wet underclothes. There was a second lightning strike close by the camp, and thunder as loud and sharp as a cannonade. Leveritt toweled herself dry, pulled on khaki pants and a flannel shirt, found her voice at last.

"I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine to me."

She did not sound fine to herself. "I was just dazzled by the lightning."

"You're lucky you weren't fried by it. I don't guess you'd've been yelling bloody murder if it'd hit you, but it must've hit right behind you. I'd swear I saw your silhouette right through the tent flap."

"Really, I'm fine. Really."

"Well, you lie down." Gilzow made a shivery sound. "I'm breaking out the blankets. First it's too hot for sleep, now it's too chilly."

Leveritt stretched out on her cot, and Gilzow spread a light blanket over her, tucked it around her almost tenderly, and extinguished the lantern. Leveritt lay listening to the rain's arrhythmic drumming. It shouldn't be my job, she thought, to have to remember Ed Morris. The storm passed. She slept.

* * *

The following morning was as warm and humid as though there had been no rainstorm. The normally clear and placid river had become a muddy torrent. Erosion was rapid in the Silurian; the steaming flatland, which drained through notches in the bluffs, looked the same and yet subtly changed. The camp's denizens, ten people in all, stood about in twos and threes, surveyed the valley and the plain, and talked, depending on their specialties, of turbidity or fossiliferous outcrops or possible revisions in topographical maps.

Leveritt and Holmes spent the day in a tent with the sides drawn up, consolidating survey data and incorporating it into a three-dimensional computer model of the region from the valley to the hills. Over tens of millions of years, the land had been repeatedly submerged, then raised, drained, eroded. "Up and down," Holmes said, "more times than the proverbial whore's drawers." Leveritt, her fierce concentration momentarily broken, shot him an oh-please look. They barely noticed a brief mid-morning cloudburst, barely paused for lunch, and might have skipped it but for the noise made by a couple of campmates returning muddy and ravenous from a collecting sortie into the valley. The sun was halfway down the sky when Holmes abruptly switched off his laptop, stretched, and declared that they could continue that evening, but right at that moment he needed some downtime. Leveritt glared at his retreating back until he had disappeared into the next tent; she found herself looking past the tent at the barren plain and the distant hills, and after a minute she resigned herself to thinking about Ed Morris and wondering what had become of him.

Ed Morris. Ed Morris. Maybe you arrived high and dry and unhurt out there on the plain. . . .

Her catalog of the possible fates of Ed Morris had grown extensive. It occurred to her now to record them in a notebook, like Gilzow's models of geologic time. Then she remembered Lieutenant Hales's injunction against writing anything that had to do with Ed Morris. She still did not feel safe from Hales.

Ed Morris. You arrived and—what? You wasted at least a little time and energy being confused and frightened. But after a while, you gathered your wits and took stock of your predicament. And what a predicament. You've got no food, no water, no idea of where you are. You know only where you *aren't*. You have only the clothes on your back and the laptop in your hand.

If it's night, you learn immediately that the stars are no help at all. The constellations you know don't exist yet. You wander around in the dark, fall into a ravine, break your neck and die instantly. . . .

Or break your leg and expire miserably over the course of a couple of days.

Back to the beginning. You find water, a rivulet, and follow it to a stream and follow that to the river and follow the river to the sea and find the main camp. . . .

Or find nothing, if you've arrived before there is a camp.

Or you don't find water and don't fall and break any bones. You just wander around until your strength gives out.

No. You do find water, you reach the river, but you realize your strength will inevitably give out, that you're lost and doomed to die in the middle of nowhere and no two ways about it, unless you take a chance, eat some of the local flora or fauna, shellfish, millipedes, whatever you can grab, anything you can keep down. You eat it raw, because you don't have any way to make fire, but you don't get sick and die. You—what do you do, if you live?

You live out your life alone, Adam without Eve in paleo-Eden. Robinson Crusoe of the dawn.

Alone with your laptop.

Best-case scenario, Ed Morris. You walk into camp just around dinnertime tonight, ragged and emaciated after an epic trek, and tired of subsisting on moss and invertebrates, but alive, whole, and proud of yourself.

Not-as-good scenario, at least not as good for you, but it'd let everybody give you your due and let me be done with you. We find the cairn you built with the biggest rocks you could move. Inside the cairn, we find your laptop. The seals're intact, the circuitry isn't corroded. We can read the message you left for us. . . .

Lot of work for a dying man.

Okay. First, you figure out how to survive. *Then* you build a cairn. You wander around building cairns all over the place, increasing the chances we'll find at least one of them.

Leveritt went quickly to her tent. She hung a canteen from her belt, put a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head, and started walking toward the hills. The wet ground crunched underfoot.

The levelness of the flatland was an illusion; the ground was all barely perceptible slopes, falling, rising, like the bosom of a calm sea. When she could no longer see the camp, she planted her fists on her hips and stood looking around at the rocky litter and thought, Now what?

Take stock, she told herself.

I've eaten, I'm not lost, my life isn't at stake here. None of which Ed Morris could say. I'm not confused and scared, either, and I haven't been injured. Besides not having eaten for ten, twelve hours before the jump, he didn't look like he had a lot of body fat to live off. On the plus side, he was a mountain climber and a skydiver, in good shape and not a physical coward.

How long would it have taken him to get over the confusion and fright?

Give him the benefit of the doubt. A career in accountancy implies a well-ordered mind.

How much more time would've passed before it occurred to him to build a cairn? Then he'd have had to pick a site where a cairn would have a chance of being found, where it wouldn't get washed away, where there was an ample supply of portable rock. If he was back toward the hills, he'd have found the streambeds full of smooth stones of a particularly useful size. Out here, he'd just have had to make do with what's at hand.

How much rock could he have moved before his strength gave out?

Leveritt picked up a grapefruit-sized chunk of limestone, carried it a dozen feet, and set it down next to a slightly larger chunk. She worked her way around and outward from the two, gathering the bigger stones, carrying them back. After laboring steadily for the better part of two hours, she was soaked with perspiration, her arms, back, and legs ached, and she had erected an indefinite sort of pyramid approximately three feet high. Increasingly, she had expended time and energy locating suitable stones at ever greater distances from the cairn and lugging them over to it. She squatted to survey her handiwork.

Ed Morris, she told herself, wouldn't have stopped working at this point, because he didn't have a camp to return to when he got tired. Still, it's a respectable start, stable, obviously the work of human hands.

She rose and walked in the direction of the camp. She paused once to look back and wonder, How long before it tumbles down?

No one in camp seemed to have noticed her absence. Typical, she thought. She discovered, however, that she could not maintain a sour mood for very long. She and Holmes worked together for an hour after dark, and then she retired to her tent and, soon, to her cot. Despite the mugginess of the evening, she had no trouble falling asleep.

For the next two days, work thoroughly involved her. On the afternoon of the third day, she returned to the cairn. She started to add to it, decided, No, moved off a hundred yards, and built a second cairn. Thereafter, she spent most of such free daylit time as she had piling up stones. She never returned to any site.

Now her absences did attract notice, Holmes trailed her past two abandoned cairns to her latest site. She answered his questions with monosyllables or shrugs or ignored the questions altogether, keeping on the move the whole while, finding, prying up, carrying, setting down stones. She refused his offer to help. Finally, he said, quite good-naturedly, "You need a hobby, Bonnie."

"This is my hobby, Mike." She wished aloud that he would go away, and he did.

That evening, over a dinner that tasted better than dinner usually did, Gilzow asked her what she was doing, and Leveritt replied, "Pursuing mental health." Later, she was almost unable to keep herself from laughing at one of Holmes's stupid jokes.

Two weeks and seven cairns after she had begun, as she lay on the edge of sleep, she realized with a start that she had not thought about Ed Morris all that day.

Four days later, when she had returned from building her eighth and last cairn, she asked around for a copy of *Robinson Crusoe.* Nobody had one. Gilzow offered her *Emma,* by Jane Austen. "Close enough," Leveritt said.

A month passed.

The supply boat arrived three days ahead of schedule. Everyone turned out to carry boxes; the first people to reach the boat yelled to those following, "Brinkman's here!" The big man, who had been downriver for weeks, stood in the bow, waving his shapeless hat. It transpired that the loud, sincere welcome was not entirely for him. He had brought a mixed case of liquor.

When the supplies had been unloaded and the camp had settled down for a round or two of good stiff drinks, Brinkman sought out Leveritt and asked her to walk with him along the bluff. They had scarcely put the camp out of earshot when he heaved a great sigh, his ebullient humor fell away from him like a cloak, and he suddenly looked tired and pale under his tan and more solemn than she could recall having seen him.

"I really came all the way up here," he said, "to tell you this personally. Two days ago, they dug something out of the marsh down by the main camp. It was one of the—part of one of the gurneys they use in the jump station."

"Ed Morris," Leveritt said bleakly. She had not said the name aloud since her conversation with Michael Diehl. Now, as though invoked by her speaking it, a humid wind swept up the valley, bearing a faint fetid breath of the estuary.

Brinkman said, "A Navy security officer named Hales told me about it."

"More surprises. I'd've thought he'd be swearing everyone to secrecy."

"It was too late for that. Everybody in camp knew it by the time he heard about it. Everybody."

"What about Ed Morris himself?"

"They're digging around. They haven't found anything else yet, and God knows if they will. The gurney's all twisted up like a pretzel, and one end's melted. God knows what that implies—besides the obvious, terrific heat. The thing was buried in a mud bank. Impacted. A botanist tripped over an exposed part."

"How long had it been there?"

Brinkman shook his head. "They're still working on that, but even the most conservative guess puts it before the manned phase of the expedition. As to how it got there—there has to be an inquest. You have to be there for it."

Leveritt groaned. "I don't have anything to tell."

"So Hales said. But people higher up're calling the shots. Everything's got to be official, and you've got to be part of it."

"I *cannot* get away from this thing!" Leveritt sat down on a knob of rock and angrily kicked at the ground. "Not from Hales and the Navy, and, most of all, not from Ed Morris. I thought I'd done it, finally worked it out by myself, but—"

"I'm *sorry,* Bonnie. You have to go back with me in the morning. I can find work for you to do until this thing's over."

"Making coffee?" She could not keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I want to be *here,* Rob."

"I've never known you not to be willing to do what you had to do so you could do what you want to do. While you're there—the San Diego bunch has talked about holding a memorial service. I kind of gather none of them knew Morris all that well, or liked him, or something. But he is the expedition's first casualty. Since you were almost the last person to see him, perhaps you could—"

Leveritt shook her head emphatically. "No."

"Bonnie, the man is dead."

"I couldn't eulogize him if my life depended on it. What I know about him wouldn't fill half a dozen sentences. He talked too fast and dressed like Jungle Jim. He said he liked mountain climbing and sky diving. And I'm very sorry about what happened to him, but it wasn't my fault."

"Who said it was your fault?" Brinkman knelt beside her and picked at his cuticle. "There has to be one meaningful thing you could say about him."

Leveritt sighed. She looked down at the supply boat and imagined herself on it again, sitting, as before, under the white canopy with Brinkman, drinking coffee from a thermos bottle, and glimpsing the pier and the cluster of tents and Quonset huts through the fog. She saw it all as though it were a movie being shown in reverse. She would have to go back and back and back, until she reached a point before Ed Morris had taken over her life, and start anew. This time, she told herself, I will make things happen the way they're supposed to happen. I *will* be the hero of my own story.

She said, "When he found out how nervous I was, he gave me a pep talk. And just before I went through the hole, he gave me a wink of encouragement."

"Well, then, if nothing else, you owe him for that wink." Brinkman could not have spoken more softly and been heard.

Leveritt closed her eyes and thought of the scene in the jump station, the purposeful technicians, Ed Morris's face framed by the bars of the railing. She looked helplessly at Brinkman, who said, "What?"

The humid wind moved up the valley again, and again she smelled the estuary's attenuated fetor of death and of life coming out of death. She exhaled harshly and said, "Nothing." She had meant to say that she could not recall the color of Ed Morris's eyes. "Never mind. I'll think of something." The wind passed across the rocky plain, toward the ancient crumbled hills and beyond. ●

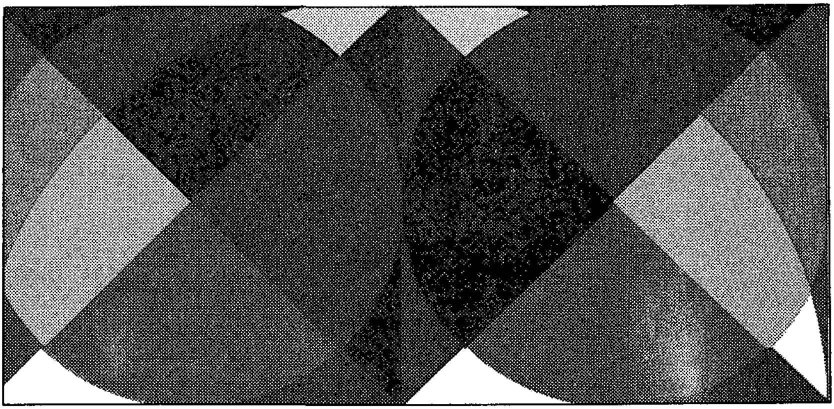


Illustration by Anthony Bari

DAY OMEGA

—for Frederik Pohl

maybe your mitochondria
will be left on that day
(but even this day these
are not yours, really,
hitching their ride from
past to future with now
just another onramp on the way, and you
just another stranger
who stopped to pick them up,
as far as you're going,
if that'll help),

but they will not think of you
as ancestor, any more
than you think of some barely formed
bit of organic twitch as ancestor,
or some tree-thing as ancestor,
eye-wide in the dark,
not like you think
of Grampy Joe, who still
has an appendix, or had one, anyway,
and five fingers and five toes,
each hand or foot,
they will not, could not
think of you that way,
even charitably.

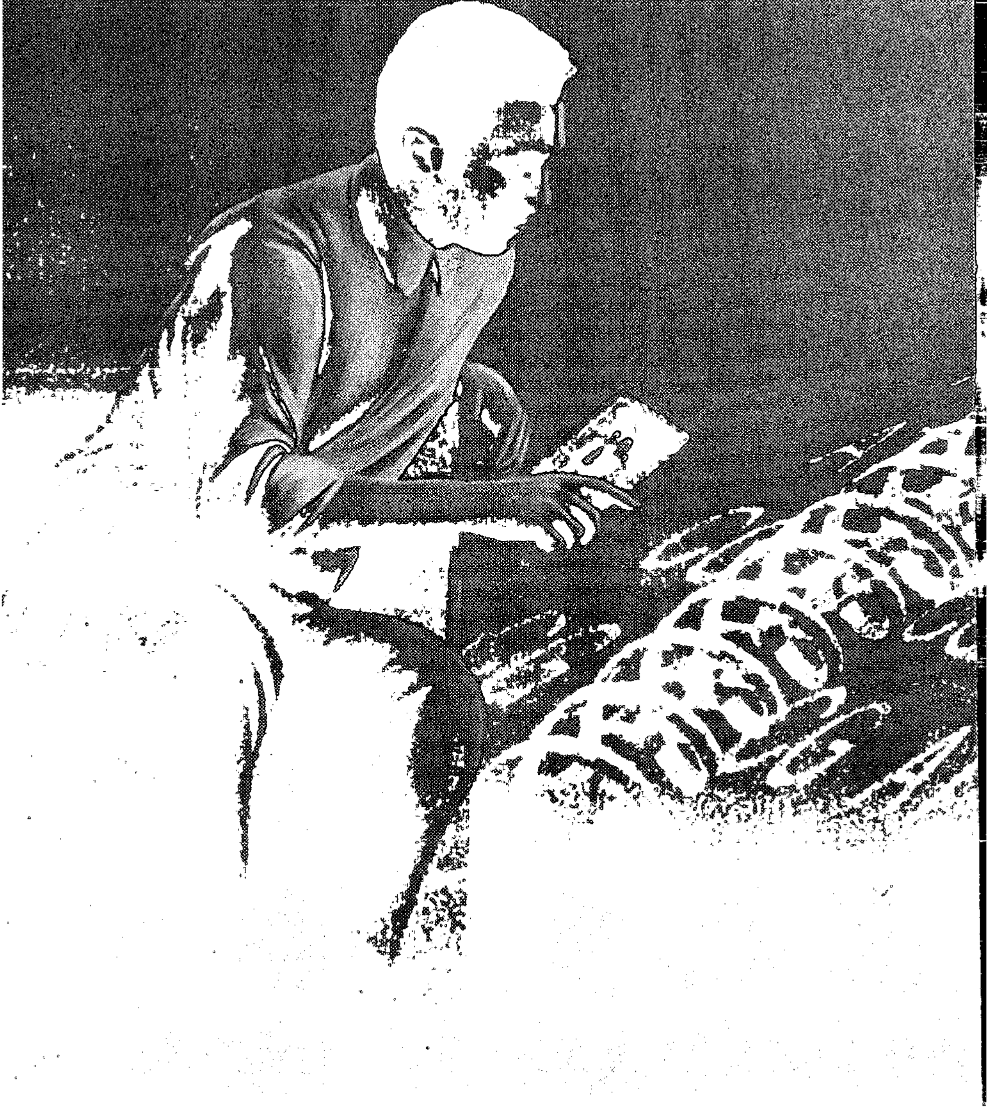
oh, they are beyond day million, they
are so far past that, past human
and day billion and beyond,
you would not know them
for the fruit of the fruit
in their myriad forms
on worlds that do not even exist
in your time.

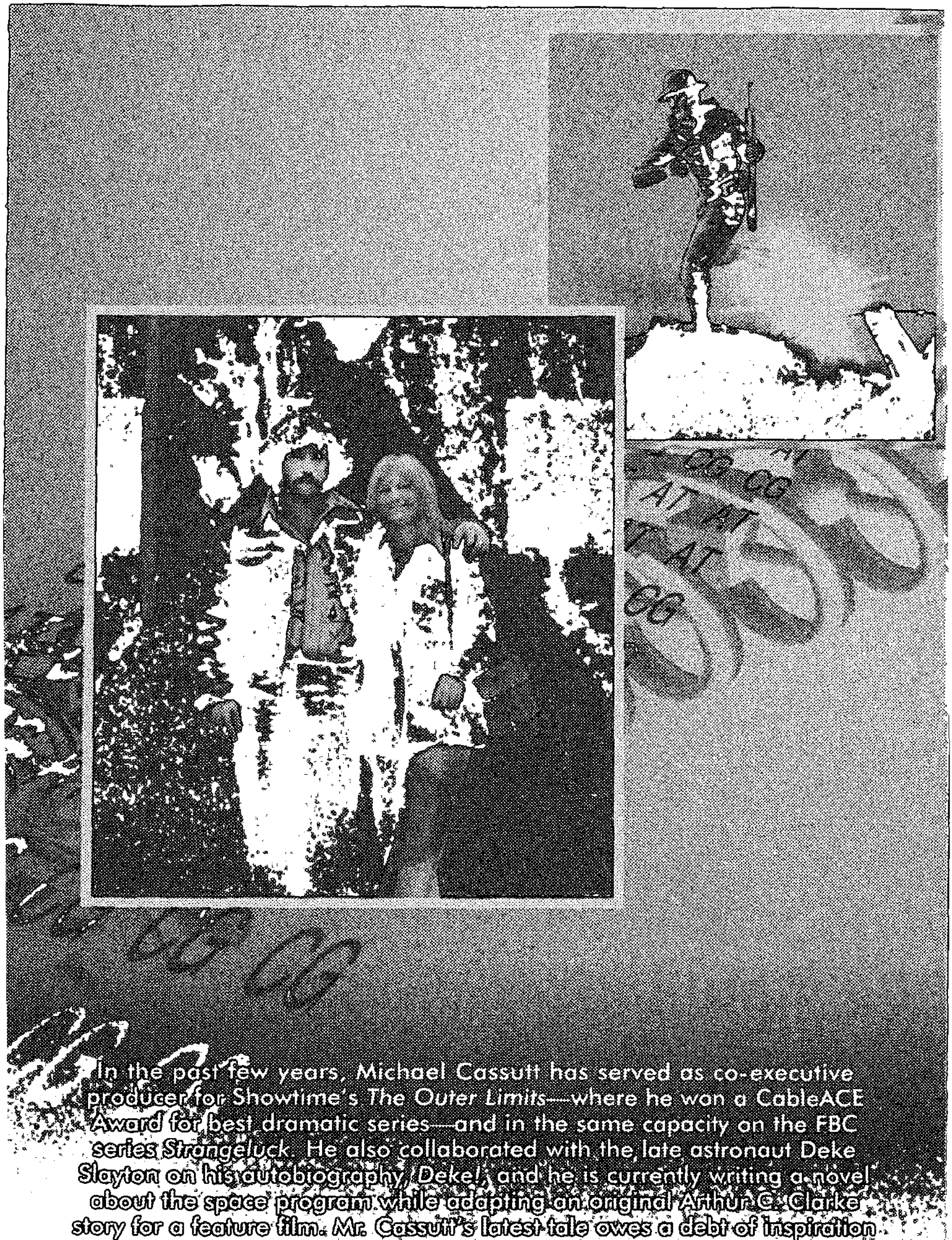
maybe your mitochondria,
that you'd picked up at evolution's yard sale
and handed on—that essence
of ape and earlier that's been in the family
for years (and now the great-grandchildren
don't know what to do with it).
maybe that strange life will still be there
on day Omega, hiding inside
and thinking the tiniest thoughts,
and smug, as the stars go out,
which is as far as you were going, anyway.

—W. Gregory Stewart

Michael Cassutt

GENERATION ZERO





In the past few years, Michael Cassutt has served as co-executive producer for Showtime's *The Outer Limits*—where he won a CableACE Award for best dramatic series—and in the same capacity on the FBC series *Strangeluck*. He also collaborated with the late astronaut Deke Slayton on his autobiography *Deke!*, and he is currently writing a novel about the space program while adapting an original Arthur C. Clarke story for a feature film. Mr. Cassutt's latest tale owes a debt of inspiration to author Joel Richards February 1992 *Asimov's* story, "Overlays."

Illustration by George H. Krauter

I have apparently reached the age at which funerals are more common than weddings or baby showers. What made Kathleen Vossler's death from ovarian cancer at a relatively young age doubly shocking was that we had once lived together.

The news reached me on vacation in Arizona with Molly. Our marriage had reached a bit of a crisis and Molly thought some time away, alone, would help. I wasn't enthusiastic about the idea. Putting yourself in an artificial environment is the worst possible way to uncover true feelings. But escaping from L.A. during the torrential rainy season was attractive—I had just spent six months on a TV special that was apparently not going to be aired—and I wasn't ready to give up on the marriage.

The resort was the kind that provides you with a fax in your suite. I checked home for messages for the third time on our first day there to learn that Ed Vossler had called. Molly and I both knew immediately what that meant.

The previous April I had turned forty. Molly had planned an elaborate party, inviting not only my L.A. friends, but others from my past, including Kathleen Vossler, who now lived in Vancouver.

I hadn't really expected her to come, but was surprised that there wasn't a phoned regret or any acknowledgment of any kind, not even one of those cards with the beautiful girl on the cover that says on the inside, "You're old enough to be her father." I had just about put it out of my mind when one Sunday in June the phone rang, and it was Kathleen. "Christ," she said, "I thought I'd get your machine."

"Sorry, you've got the real thing." We had stayed in touch over the years. Even if you forget that we grew up in the same small town and attended the same high school before living in sin, she had, in one of those weird coincidences, wound up in the same business as me, doing computer graphics of the sort that I used in my projects. We even had professional friends in common, and would have dinner maybe every other year when we happened to be in the same city. "I was wondering when I'd hear from you. Happy early fortieth birthday," I added. (Hers followed mine by three months.)

"Thanks," she said. "I'm in the hospital."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Actually, it's quite serious. I've got cancer."

(Someone should publish a *Baby Boomer's Guide to Death and Life-Threatening Illness*. I mean, I may have missed the big wars, but I've been to a lot of funerals for a guy my age. Two friends in the business dead of AIDS in the last two years, not to mention a guy I roomed with in college. All of my parents' friends are now on some kind of chemo. What do you say? Do you laugh it off? Tell her it's only a little speedbump in the highway of life? That they're doing wonderful work on cancer these days?) What happens is that you blurt, "Oh, shit."

"I'm not dead yet," she snapped, sounding like the Kathleen of the disco years. What followed was a narration of unusual pains, confusing tests, horrifying white blood cell counts, unnecessary weight loss and now debilitating radiation therapy. Her last words were, "I think I've got a good chance of beating this. I just didn't want you to hear it from someone else."

Months passed with no direct contact. Mutual friends told us she was doing better. In October Molly talked to Kathleen—they had a relationship that had nothing to do with me: Kathleen, in fact, had introduced me to Molly after we split up—and was greatly encouraged. Kathleen was in the last phase of her treatment; she expected to be back at work in a month; she was feeling better, even though the whole summer had been a real trial for Ed, her husband, and Caitlin, her thirteen-year-old daughter.

That's why the call three weeks later, in Tucson, was so shocking.

The rest of our vacation was about as fun and relaxing as you'd expect. Obviously we were going to have none of the expected confrontations or revelations, so we decided to fly back to L.A. Molly was about to start assembling a network pilot that had to be delivered in a week. There was no way she could take another day to attend the funeral, so I was the one who boarded Canadian Air at 7:30 the next morning.

It was cold and rainy in Vancouver as I rented a car and looked for the Church of the Holy Apostles on a map. It turned out to be in West Van, on the other side of the hand and thumb that make up Vancouver, just across from Stanley Park.

We had heard from Ed Vossler that the funeral arrangements were a bit complex. Kathleen's mother had moved from the small town of our youth and wanted her daughter buried near her in Texas, but since Kathleen's friends and life were in Vancouver, there was to be a combination memorial and wake there. The first shock was the sight of Kathleen in the coffin . . . she looked waxy, older than I remembered, and her head was covered by a bad wig. Fortunately a heavyset woman in her sixties was blocking the approach to the coffin, and I was spared a closer encounter.

I found myself with tears in my eyes as Ed Vossler emerged from the church office with Caitlin. He came right up to me. "She would have been very happy that you came all this way." Good old reliable Ed. If he ever resented my vague but persistent presence in Kathleen's life, he never gave any sign. "Have you talked to Julie?"

Julie was Kathleen's mother, whom I had not seen in eighteen years. She was the heavy older woman at the coffin; I hadn't even recognized her. And since it was clear she was never going to move away from that coffin, I had to approach her. The sound of Julie's voice triggered memories, my God. The tiny little apartment Kathleen and I had shared in Palms. . . . The one trip we took with her family to Florida. . . . Things I had not remembered in years, buried in some deep memory vault.

Before too long both of us were sniffling. I finally managed to release Julie to the other mourners, fade back in the crowd, and come face-to-face with Sherry Nelson.

Kathleen and I worked in different ends of the television business—not network primetime series, but informational TV, Discovery Channel, Arts & Entertainment stuff. I had run into Sherry Nelson some years back while researching a series on memory and the brain. Sherry worked for a biochemical company called Cormex, specifically with a neural scientist named Fruchtman who was unlocking memories by zapping the opiate receptors with a mix of neuropeptides. (Five years ago I could have laid this out for you with some sort of clarity, but when the series failed to sell all details about the subject matter went right out of my head.) Sherry's connection to Kathleen was in turning unlocked memories into actual images.

Sherry was a big girl, tall and stout. She had gotten a bit stouter and—if that were possible—a bit taller in the intervening years and I hadn't immediately recognized her, either. She said, "Bruce! I wondered if I would see you here."

Actually, I could have said the same thing. After we exchanged mutual condolences, I told her, "I've never really given up on that memory project. You know how it is, though. You lose funding, other projects get in the way . . ."

"You should see what I'm doing with it now."

This promising line of conversation was broken by the priest, who informed us that the services were about to begin.

I think we want to skip over the funeral. Several of Kathleen's friends spoke of her vitality, her generosity, her biting sense of humor. Typical funeral stuff, except for that biting business. Ed spoke about Kathleen's last days, Caitlin read a poem. You get the idea. You'd have to believe that Kathleen was in heaven, if you were the kind of person who believed in heaven. If, however, like me, you're at best only open-minded on the business of God and the afterlife, it was tough. Let's just say I was relieved to get to the reception.

There wasn't any liquor, which may have been a wise move on Ed Vossler's part, but depressed me even more. I was one of the first through the receiving line, said exactly the same things to Kathleen's mother that I had said before the service, then stood around drinking punch. Eventually I got tired of that, and went and found Sherry Nelson, who was still in the line. We spent a good fifteen minutes on the Kathleen situation. Since her company was based in Seattle, a couple of hours drive to the south, she had seen the illness close-up.

"So you were still working together?"

"Yes. More closely than we were when I first met you."

"How come I haven't heard about any of this?"

"You must just be badly informed." Then she smiled. "Actually, it's a commercial development that's being kept quiet because it's a little controversial."

Before I became a full-time non-fiction TV hack I did a tour as an I-team producer in Chicago, uncovering crooked aldermen, padded city payrolls, white slavery, that sort of thing. Saying "controversial" to me is like saying "double dare" to an eight-year-old. "What could be controversial about making memories into pictures? It's the ultimate warm fuzzy. A Kodak moment squared."

"For nice memories, absolutely. But the most vivid emotional memories are triggered by fear. People have a lot of fearful memories. Maybe not people in television."

"I could tell you stories." I could have told her stories that were as fresh as last week, for that matter.

"Imaging memories is actually old news," she said. "Now we're at the point where we're mapping lateral nuclei in the amygdala—the actual center of the brain in which these kinds of memory reside. Pretty soon we'll be able to make a three-dimensional model of your memory and tell you what's in it, and where."

I was immediately intrigued. If you could download somebody's memories, you'd *never* have bullshit eyewitness testimony in court. Or in anything. This also had the potential to be a very bad idea—if you had parts of your life and past you wanted to hide.

At that point we reached Ed and Julie and I stepped aside, to save all of us a third identical encounter. My last words to Sherry Nelson were, "I'd love to talk about this some more. I might be able to get the project off the ground this time."

She seemed hesitant. "I don't know. . . ." But then, having engaged in some quick, internal debate, she reached into her purse and handed me her card. "If you ever find yourself in Seattle, give me a call," she said. "I can't promise anything."

I left soon after, and got caught in some lane change going across Lion's Gate Bridge, then ran into L.A.-style evening drive gridlock in downtown Vancouver. Realizing I was not likely to make my plane, I pulled over and used my cell phone to call Canadian Air. Instead of rescheduling, I heard myself cancel the flight altogether. Then I called the car rental company.

I thought about driving across the border and down to Seattle that night, but the traffic was murderous. Vancouver needs a few more left-hand turn lanes. So I checked into a new hotel between the Burrard and

Granville Street bridges: it was within walking distance of an underground mall, so I even picked up a change of clothes.

When I finally reached Molly she wanted all the gory details of the funeral, which I was reluctant to replay, much less share. Then I broke the news that I wouldn't be coming home that night. Maybe not for a couple of nights. "Oh," she said, making that syllable work overtime.

"Look," I said, "I was going to miss my plane. I ran into Sherry Nelson—" Molly knew about Sherry Nelson and the lost memory project "—and I'm pretty depressed," I told her, which was mostly true. "You're always telling me to express my feelings. There's an expression."

"I was really hoping we could be together tonight." It was a nice statement, and made me feel like shit. But I was beyond guilt.

"I'll call you from Seattle in the morning," I told her.

Cormex had its offices on the 405 loop in Renton, within mortar distance of Microsoft. I had gotten a ridiculously early start—so early that I had to wait for a bank to open just across the border in Blaine to change some money back—and was checked into a Marriott Suites before some of the other guests had checked out, and on a phone to Sherry before lunch.

"This is a surprise," she said.

"Well, you did give me your card."

She put me on hold. A moment or two later she returned, on what sounded like a different phone. "Sorry," she said, "that wasn't very private."

I told her I couldn't keep from thinking about this memory imaging stuff. "I'm not sure if I'm interested in it as a project, or just as a human being." This was a thought that just popped into my head and out my mouth that instant.

"Well, it is fascinating. But . . ." And here she lowered her voice. ". . . there's a lot of disagreement here about what to do with it."

"Look, it sounds as though you want to talk to somebody. Why not me?" While she was thinking that over, I added: "You know my reputation—" That is, while I wasn't likely to survive Senate scrutiny for a Supreme Court post, as TV producers went I was a model of purity. "—and I won't use anything you don't want me to use. You'll be protected." More thought.

The final bullet: "Who else in the company is talking to a reporter right now?"

She didn't want me to come to Cormex, which was reasonable. We selected a Coco's somewhere in between, and agreed to meet just after the lunch rush.

Sherry showed up at the Coco's acting like a woman in one of those TV movies where the victim gets gunned down before the end of the opening credits. She carried a purse the size of Rhode Island, and inside it there was a stack of computer diskettes, a few pieces of paper, a foil container with four green pills, and a VHS videotape.

"This is your starter kit," she said. The diskettes contained formulae and imaging programs, the paper had a bit of administrative and funding history, the pills were the trigger mechanisms, and the tape was the result.

"Is anybody going to miss this stuff?"

Sherry shrugged. "Nobody will be looking, unless . . ."

". . . It winds up on television." I patted her hand. "We're weeks away from anything like that, don't worry." As we ate our salads it was clear to me that Sherry was so jumpy that the conversation wasn't doing me much good. Besides, I wanted to look at the videotape. I suggested as much. She checked her watch and agreed to go back to the Marriott with me.

On the drive over she gave me more background: "The research goes back years. It was originally funded through the National Academy of Sciences. Fruchtman became a consultant to a drug company, and got them to partner with the imaging guys to form Cormex, which was where we were when Kathleen and I first talked to you. That deal ran out, but the partners got funding from another source."

"Corporate or government?" I was thinking C.I.A., remembering the agency's experiments with hallucinogens. (Can you imagine a better intelligence tool than being able to download an agent's actual memories?)

"Corporate."

"That explains the paranoia," I said, smiling. Corporations these days are much stricter about proprietary materials than the government. Or else you would be able to dial up that Coca-Cola formula on the Internet as easily as you do uncensored National Intelligence Estimates from the Johnson administration. . . .

When we got to the room, Sherry told me about the process itself. The subject took one of these pills, which were a special kind of neuropeptide that beelined the opiate receptors in the brain. The pill, in fact, was a sophisticated hallucinogen. The subject was also wired up the yin-yang to a net that would essentially capture every electrical impulse coming out of the body. Cormex had discovered that these impulses were a form of signal transmission. The diskettes held a fraction of the program that converted those signals to images.

Once you had images, of course, making a tape was a step so simple even I could handle it.

I popped the tape into the VCR and fast-forwarded past the Cormex logo and the obligatory warnings. There was a video slate identifying this as Controlled Access Memory 97-3C or something like that, with a running time of six minutes, and a bunch of other data that might as well have been Mandarin Chinese for all I knew.

The screen showed a lawn in front of a good-sized English country house. The field had small hills and landscaping, almost like a miniature golf course. Three people were lawn bowling, a girl of perhaps fourteen in a white summer dress, a boy a little older, also nicely turned out, and a short man with a barrel chest and longish blond hair that waved in the wind.

It was all real-time. The colors were truer than you get from television . . . they had 70mm film depth. You could hear the wind and voices, though the characters weren't being particularly chatty. They were just laughing about something.

Yet there was no way you would think this was real film, because the picture wrapped around in a weird way—there was peripheral vision without distortion. The most telling factor was that there were no cuts . . . we were obviously looking out of somebody's eyes. You could even see forearms and feet . . . in one arm was a racquet of some kind.

Then the tape ended.

"You got this from somebody's *head?*"

"Yes. I mean, the output is a lot like a regular EEG, but with a lot more bandwidth. It's the program that unscrambles the images into something that makes sense to us."

"This program doesn't have a bunch of pre-loaded video templates? No needle drops from *Masterpiece Theater,* anything like that?" I added, thinking of this country house.

"No."

I thought some more. "Is the subject asleep?"

"We induce a state called lucid dreaming."

"So how do you know this isn't just a dream? Some imaginary landscape?"

"Because you can make independent checks to verify a memory: these people were at this house on such and such a date. Theoretically," she repeated. "Most people's lives aren't really amenable to that kind of research." Not yet, I wanted to add. "The real reason we can tell the difference is that dream memories reside in a different part of the brain altogether."

"Well, it obviously works." I turned over the package of pills. "Why would Cormex be reluctant to put this on the market?"

"There are problems with the test protocol," she said. "They're worried about long-term effects . . . suppose accessing the memories erased them?"

"That might not be a problem for some people." Would I erase the image of Kathleen in the coffin? Where do I sign?

A pager beeped. Both of us practically jumped, until we realized it was hers rather than mine. "I've got to go."

She stood up, but hesitated about picking up her gear. I said, "Look, I think this could be an incredible story. But I need more to go on than a single conversation. Can you leave this stuff with me overnight?" I was taking a risk because Sherry was nervous. In fact, the whole thing was starting to feel like a drug deal. "If you're worried that I'll suddenly fly off to L.A. with the pills and the tape, don't be. Besides," I said, smiling, "you know where I live."

She thought it over, and reached a decision. "Okay. I'll give you until tomorrow morning. We'll talk then."

And she left.

Actually, I *could* have made off with the memory gear and been home in L.A. by eight o'clock. If I'd been a real investigative journalist, I wouldn't have done what I did . . . which was stay at the Marriott.

Maybe it was the weather: it was actually beautiful in Seattle, while L.A. was awash in mud. Molly was a bit needy on the phone, too. Maybe it was my conscience. Maybe it was unfinished business.

I had dinner in the hotel restaurant. Actually, I had a couple or three drinks in the hotel restaurant. This isn't typical behavior for me most of the time, but the prices were right and since I'd started thinking about Kathleen after the first one, I figured another couple couldn't hurt.

Kathleen and I had gone out a few times during high school, but it was pretty casual. She had a boyfriend on the basketball team; I had managed to avoid the permanent girlfriend thing because in Fall River, Iowa, in 1973, it was too much like getting married.

I moved to L.A. to go to college and make my fortune in the exciting world of television. Kathleen went to school in Colorado. But we saw each other over summer break, and when the basketball player dribbled out of her life, I sort of dribbled in. During my last tortured year at U.C.L.A. Film School Kathleen came out to visit, and stayed. While I was proving myself a master at re-editing old episodes of *The Rifleman,* she waitressed in Westwood.

Did I love her? Desperately. Did she love me? I thought so.

I became a production assistant at Lorimar and Kathleen got a job as a secretary at The Post Group. Things were good, not so good, pretty fucking awful, then great, in that exact order.

Kathleen left me is what happened. Entirely by accident I found out she was having an affair with some married editor at the shop. I didn't have to ask her to leave: she simply left. By the end of 1980 I was a single man.

Those are my memories, however, lightly accessed. Something had gone terribly wrong in that few months, however, and part of me, now, wanted to know just what. But who would I ask? The one who knew was locked in a box wearing a bad wig.

Maybe that was what got me to the fifth drink.

In any case, somewhere about the seventh drink and the fourteenth handful of pretzels I realized I should be upstairs in bed . . . not in a bar where I might suddenly head for the parking lot and the car.

There, on the dresser, were the green pills.

"You took one," Sherry said, accusingly. This was sometime the next morning. "I left four different messages."

"I didn't get them," I said.

"I can see why."

I realized I was lying on the bed in yesterday's clothes. "Look, I can't be that fucked up; I just managed to get up and let you in."

"My husband had hernia surgery two years ago. They sent him home the same day even though he could barely walk. And *he* looked better than you do right now."

"I guess you shouldn't mix neuropeptides with vodka."

Sherry moved around the room, suddenly maternal, picking things up. "You shouldn't mix them with anything. You shouldn't be taking them unless you're wearing the right monitors." Having made some dent in the debris, she flopped down on the guest chair, thoughtfully provided by the Marriot Suites. "So . . . what happened?"

What had happened?

I had found myself on a farm. It was a cold day. . . . I knew it was spring because the fields were bare earth with patches of snow in the shadows. The sun moved in and out of the clouds. The POV was that of a child playing outside as two men in yellow overcoats drove up the rutted road in a wagon with half a dozen horses tied behind. A screen door slammed somewhere . . . voices and laughter as the men climb down from the wagon.

I had found myself on a bed in a dark room wrapped in a scratchy quilt that smelled of something. Damp. Animals, maybe. Rain was falling. I turned my head. A bearded young man, his back toward me, was building a fire.

I had found myself in the hot sun on a mountain meadow, a heavy load on my back. My feet were sweaty inside my boots; the straps of the bundle on my back were cutting welts into my shoulders. I knew I had to hurry, but I still stopped and looked up at a mountain shining in the sun, and I hummed a little tune.

"You remembered all this."

I found the helpful pad of Marriott stationery. "I actually made notes a couple of times." I had awakened between dreams or flashbacks to drink more water and written *spring-men with horses . . . cabin-rain . . . toting-mountains.* "If they were dreams, they were incredibly vivid. I can recall smells and heat." I stopped suddenly.

"What?"

"None of this stuff ever happened to me." I had a surge of real anger. Goddammit, who cared about farms and fields and cold? I wanted to go back to 1978. I wanted Kathleen to be alive. I wanted to know why we had split up. "I can see what Cormex's problem is: your pill didn't actually unlock my memories."

"Did I say that's what it would do? Was this before or after we talked about having you try this on your own?" Sherry was resting her face on her hand, watching my reaction. By now she was smiling. "I have a confession to make," she added. "I set you up. I knew you wouldn't be able to resist taking the pills. Nobody has, so far."

"Not even you?"

She pointed to the tape, which was still sitting in the player. "Where do you think those memories came from?"

"The country house?"

"Well," she said, "it came out of my head. You see . . . that's the problem. That house . . . that lovely lawn . . . it really existed in Islington, near London, in the late 1800s. It was torn down in 1949 for a development." She smiled. "I was born in 1957. For that matter, I've never been to England."

While I was trying to figure out what this meant, she added, "My mother *was* born in England. Her father was quite an amateur athlete who had a younger sister and a friend who died in World War I. The friend was short and stocky and had long blond hair like that.

"You understand what I'm saying, don't you? Those aren't my memories, they're my *grandfather's* of some summer afternoon in the last century."

What we had here, with the green pills and imaging program, wasn't a system for accessing memories: it was a system for accessing *past lives*.

In the year I was born a book was published about an Irish woman named Bridey Murphy who "discovered" under hypnosis that she had lived before . . . had been, in fact, a peasant in the seventeenth century. The book became a sensation of the moment, then faded away, though I have heard that even in the 1950s regression by hypnosis to a "past life" was quite common.

The idea has always been a pseudo-scientific bonanza. If you "lived" before you just might go on "living" after you "die," right? People found this comforting, even though no one seemed to be at all affected by the "fact" of this former existence. I mean, as I understand it, nobody remembered these past lives until they got drugged or hypnotized. What kind of comfort did that bring? Yes, there were some on the fringes of pseudo-science who claimed that a person's life was affected by a past existence in ways you couldn't know. You fell in love with someone you knew in a past life. You wound up working for a guy who had ruined you in a past life.

I can't judge the concept's validity in the real world, but in certain, shall we say, easily manipulated segments of the Hollywood community—that is, members of the acting profession—past lives were believed to be as true as Jesus or George Washington. Well, truer than that.

Which meant, of course, that members of the, shall we say, excessively cynical segments of the Hollywood community—that is, me—hadn't given it a moment's thought. If an actor believed it, it had to be bullshit.

So you can understand why for a brief moment—well, not that brief—I was afraid I was falling for the boomer equivalent of the Bridey Murphy scam. But I knew a lot about Cormex . . . about Sherry Nelson . . . I even knew a bit about Sherry Nelson's boss, the brilliant Dr. Fruchtman . . . and none of it fit with the profile of the usual New Age psychic goofball.

There were pills. There was tape. There was Sherry Nelson waiting for me to say something. "Oh," was the best I could manage.

"Now you know why nobody wants to go public with this thing. They're afraid they'll become this year's cold fusion."

"Do they doubt that they're accessing past lives?"

"After five years of testing, no. And now a lot of people just wish we'd never invented it."

"But you don't."

She thought this over. "I . . . don't think we should make that judgment. We discovered it . . . we made it work. I think somebody else should determine its value."

"Someone like a TV producer? Sherry, what are you thinking?"

She shrugged. "If there are any holes in the theory, the best way to find them is let someone like you at it. And if it's true . . ."

If it's true. Wow.

"Besides," she added. "Somebody else needs to be tested. Someone who doesn't work for Cormex."

I smiled. "That won't be a problem in Hollywood. People will try anything if they think it will make them famous."

We drove over to Cormex. It wasn't much of a place—bigger than Job's and Wozniak's garage, but still—one of those two-story hutches inside a technical park. I expected guards; I was disappointed and said so.

"We're more worried about what goes out than what comes in."

Sherry walked me in the back door. As we worked our way through the building, I got a sense of the whole set up, figuring maybe twenty employees in a dozen offices, a couple of labs and video bays. The look was typical Seattle: lots of Generation Xers in half-hearted grunge. A few Xers in white shirts and ties. "Where are the grownups?" I asked.

"Fruchtman is down in San Jose. The other partners are out today. Actually, I'm the oldest by about five years."

That's another thing about being forty that requires some mental adjustment. You go from being the bright kid to being Ward Cleaver in what seems like minutes.

Within an hour I was as informed about the amygdala and hippocampus and neural pathways and declarative memories and long-term potentiation as a TV producer ever needs to be. I was asking Sherry things like, how many bytes of data can be stored in a human brain?

"There are probably a billion in the memory cortex alone. A lot of the data has been corrupted, the way data on a computer disk gets if you leave it sitting on top of another disk long enough. But it's still there: and thank God the most important stuff stands out. It's as if it gets flagged with a special marker because of the emotion associated with the memory."

"Well, it's all chemicals, isn't it?"

She snorted. "Yeah, that's one way of looking at it."

We get genetic material from our parents, who got it from their parents. Why not *memories,* too? When you get that gene dump from your old man's ejaculation, you get his memories, which get combined with those stored in Mom's egg.

The mythology of past life memories shows people remembering their *deaths.* That can't be true: if there's a biological basis to memory transfer, the data would only contain your parents' lives *up to the moment of your conception.* And so on back through history. (Unless you are, in fact, divine, both of your parents had to be alive to that point.)

How far back? How long do genes last? "I need one of those disks," I said, "and a monitoring rig." Before Sherry could protest, I added: "That's if you really want me to do the story. I'm going to have to have the real goods with me."

It really made her nervous, but she gave me the stuff. "My professional life is in your hands."

"Look," I said, "this isn't going on the air anywhere if you and Fruchtman are unhappy. You wanted me to know what you had . . . I found it interesting. Let's see if we can find a market and some money. Then we can worry about the shape and tone of the story."

This might not have worked if I hadn't been so goddamn sincere, and if Sherry hadn't been through the process with me before. I promised I would get her down to L.A. the moment I had a volunteer lined up. Then I got out of there.

I made some calls and checked out of the Marriott. Molly was still working, so I wasn't able to reach her until I got to Sea-Tac.

What I did then was drive back to Vancouver.

"I don't believe this," Ed Vossler said. He was about thirty seconds away from throwing me out of his house. I wouldn't have blamed him: he and Caitlin had just returned from Brownsville, Texas, where Kathleen had been buried. I had phoned ahead—I've done my share of ambush interviews, but the circumstances called for a unique mixture of sheer gall and world class diplomacy. I had decided my first "volunteer" should be Caitlin Vossler.

"You knew what Kathleen was working on," I told him. This was the single biggest weapon I had: he knew all about the process. "You can call Sherry if you want," I added. This was the single biggest risk I was taking. I was supposed to be on my way back to L.A.

He looked as though the air had been let out of him. "She's only been gone a week. Why do this now?"

I was asking myself that very thing. The best answer I could come up with was, why wait? But I went for science and the public interest. "The emotion is raw right now. The memories will never be more easily retrievable. Timing is everything; people at both companies will go the extra mile to honor her memory. A year from now or five years from now, it'll just be that much more difficult."

I wondered what I would be thinking in Ed's position. If I would be looking on Bruce Possehl as a grave robber or a child molester.

"I guess, ultimately, it's up to her." He called: "Caitlin!"

She walked into the room wearing some retro outfit—lime-green pedal pushers and a Hawaiian shirt. At her best she was more reminiscent of her dad than her mom; at this particular moment she looked like Lucy Ricardo.

Ed, understandably flustered, introduced us. "Dad," Caitlin said with all the contempt a thirteen-year-old can muster, "I've met Bruce before." She shook hands and sat down, all business.

Ed started to explain the situation. "Honey, you know Mom was working on a system that would turn memories into pictures." Caitlin waited patiently. Ed turned to me for the rest of it.

"It's still experimental, but I think it's ready for a test, and I'd like you to be the subject."

She stared at me coolly . . . now she reminded me of Kathleen. "Why?"

"Because you have some of your mother's memories. They're important to me. To your father, too."

"Will I *see* my mother again?"

"If this system works, you'll see things she saw in her life." I didn't add that she was likely to see things her great-great-grandparents had seen, too.

She glanced over at her father . . . knowing he wasn't crazy about this. "Okay."

The early takes were interesting, but not particularly meaningful. Ed, it turned out, was part Cherokee, and by God there was a sequence in there that looked as if it had come out of *Dances with Wolves* . . . a deer brought down and tackled in the woods . . . dragged in triumph back to a camp.

There was one sequence that had the feel of the truly ancient: we found ourselves in a cave of some kind . . . a picture was being daubed on the wall. It wasn't a woolly rhino or something out of those cliffs in Chauvet, but a beautiful yellow flower.

I think I saw all of the takes. Caitlin would take a pill, then hook up for an hour at a time. While she rested between sessions I would go over the take and make multiple copies. It was repetitive work, and as I did it I played number games in my head. Caitlin had two parents, who each had two parents, who each had two parents, etc., etc. . . .

What was the population of Europe in the year 1000? What was the population of the world in the year 5000 B.C.? I realized that you didn't have to go back too many generations before it was all the same: everybody who was alive now shared memories with everyone who was alive four thousand years ago. That is, everyone who lived long enough to pass on the genes and the memories.

No wonder children were so important: they not only carried on your physical traits, they carried on the things that made you you. No wonder Ed and Caitlin watched the tapes in fascination: these were their shared family memories, their legacy.

It took three sessions, which lasted into the next day. We stopped when Caitlin started complaining of stomach pains.

As far as I was concerned, we had proven that the green pills triggered memories of past lives. I could easily see that in a few years there would be taped memories of Genghis Khan in action, of Shakespeare's appearance onstage at the Globe in one of his plays . . . hell, maybe of the Cretaceous-Tertiary event. (We must have evolved from the survivors, didn't we? So what if they weren't human?)

What we hadn't done was solve my particular problem. I was beginning to feel that it was lost forever . . . buried with Kathleen. I'm an obsessive, tunnel-visioned son of a bitch, but I had reached my limit. I thanked Ed for his incredible understanding, Caitlin for her courage, and around mid-morning on Friday, a whole week after my first hurried flight to Vancouver, I was ready to drive to the airport when the doorbell rang. Ed went to answer it. I heard voices, and when he came back he had Sherry Nelson with him.

"You fucking bastard," she said.

The ugliness started in the Vossler kitchen and wound up in the front seat of my rental car. Sherry's talking points were that I had lied. (Not exactly: I hadn't thought about using Caitlin until after leaving Cormex.) It wasn't worth a phone call? (I hadn't known if it would work.) Suppose Caitlin had gotten hurt. (Well, that would have been awful . . . but I had trusted the technology developed by Sherry and Cormex . . .)

The most cutting thing she said was that I was one of those people—

usually men, but not exclusively—who would not commit, not to a job, not to a political party, not to a lifestyle. "How many times have you moved in the past five years?"

"Am I on trial here?"

"Answer the goddamn question or I'm getting out of the car."

"Three times."

"Don't you get tired of it?"

"Hell, yes. It's a tremendous pain—"

"Then why do you do it?"

I shrugged. "There's always someplace better. A bigger place, a better neighborhood—"

"Do you like where you're living now?"

This was starting to get funny. "Why? Do you want to move to L.A.?" She reached for the door. "Yes. It's great. Okay?"

"Give me the name of your next door neighbor." I thought for a moment. Well, there was this older couple . . . I think his name was Jerome, no idea what her name was. Sherry got tired of waiting. "See?"

"See what?"

"You may be wired, Bruce, but you're not *connected*. You're only thinking right here and right now. What does this project get me? Not what does it mean? How does it affect Sherry or Ed or Caitlin or the people next door you can't even name."

"All right, I'm shallow and self-centered. Get an indictment."

"I just think it's time someone pointed this out to you, because you're dangerous. And if you wise up, you might enjoy the things you have more. Remember what John Lennon said."

The only Lennon quotes that came to mind were "We're more popular than Jesus" and "I am the Walrus." Sherry prompted me: "Life is what happens when you're making other plans. You're forty years old. Wouldn't you like to experience being grown up before you're dead?"

I've been told that one of my virtues—from Sherry's devastating critique, perhaps my only one—is that I can listen to just about anything and react reasonably. I listened to about 95 percent of this with no more anger than if she'd told me I'd broken a shoelace. When I began to feel something, it wasn't anger. It was shame. "I'm sorry."

There was more. I've found it easy to apologize at length—even easier if I'm really sorry. Eventually Sherry calmed down enough to pat me on the arm. "It really worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah."

She shook her head, amazed at herself, I guess. "Did you at least get what you wanted?"

"Actually, I didn't."

"What *were* you looking for?"

So I told her as much as she needed to know about me and Kathleen.

The living together, the breakup, the reconciliation, the surprise. She was the first person I'd ever discussed this with. Not even Molly, who knew the vague outlines. "That's funny," she said, when I finished. "When I first met you I always wondered why you and Kathleen weren't together. You had this shorthand. You had all this stuff in common. Christ, you even looked alike." She sighed. "So what are you going to do?"

My instinct was to roll her out of the car and get across the border, fast. To forget about Kathleen Vossler and all the Vosslers and green pills . . . to find a new project and a new set of friends. To basically change the subject, permanently.

Instead I walked back to the Vossler house.

I don't think I was going to ask Caitlin Vossler to do one more session for me. I went back in there to help Sherry clean up the mess.

Caitlin and Ed were still looking through the tapes with fascination and wonder. If they were interested in our argument, they didn't show it. "Maybe you guys can explain this," Ed said. "There's one scene of what looks like a doctor's office that occurs in all of Caitlin's sessions. It never completes—"

I had seen that, and tried to tell Sherry so, but she was already looking at the tapes. "A fragmented memory that recurs so often must have a hell of an emotional marker . . ."

We found it . . . the same POV of a white room, a nurse, nothing else to locate it in time and space, but presumably one of Kathleen's stronger memories.

Her stomach pains had gone away and Caitlin was actually eager to have another session. I wondered why we would think another session would take us back to that doctor's room—or if it did, why we would get any more data than we'd already gotten.

"If it's come up three times, it's a good bet to come up a fourth," Sherry said. "And since part of Caitlin's internal file manager—her unconscious memory—is aware of it, we have a good chance of getting more."

We didn't get more, exactly. We got something almost as interesting:

We found ourselves in a Pizza Hut as it existed on Washington Boulevard in Palms, just west of the 405 freeway, in 1978. I recognized it immediately as a place Kathleen and I used to visit when we got five bucks ahead.

I saw myself, age twenty-three, with hair down to my shoulders. And much thinner. I wasn't saying anything. I was looking past Kathleen—past her POV—out the window. From far away she was saying something. "What do you want to do about this?"

Seeing it, I began to remember this particular conversation. It was all about getting married. In 1978, however, nobody we knew got married, not for long, anyway. Finally my twenty-three-year-old self speaks. "I don't know. I'm not ready for anything like this."

It repeats once, twice, a little differently each time, without really changing. As if you laid a different filter over the picture or slowed down the sound.

No matter what, I look about as relaxed as Nixon at a press conference.

Then the memory suddenly returns us to the doctor's white room. There is a sheet covering us—covering Kathleen—and this time the door opens. A nurse is there, a clear look of disapproval on her face. From far away we hear her, say "I hope you're satisfied." Not, "How are you feeling?" She is stern and almost punishing. In her hand is a jar, and in the jar is a pink, froglike thing the size of a thumb.

And then she goes out.

One third to one half of the women I know have had an abortion. Many of them have children now. I don't know if it bothers them. It never used to bother me.

The hell of it was . . . I knew about Kathleen's visit to the doctor. Between the first big breakup and the conversation in the Pizza Hut she had moved out to Van Nuys, of all places, and was living in circumstances that were reduced even by our already reduced standards. She was nowhere near a bus line, and forget having a car.

Somehow she had gotten herself to the free clinic. She had called me and told me she needed a ride home, so I had gone out there one afternoon in my yellow 1971 Mercury Cougar. She was pale and weepy and I thought it was because we were split up. So I took her back to my place, which was our old place, and let her sleep. And drove over to the awful little studio she was renting, and carried out her clothes and records and stuff.

The next six months were the happiest we spent. And then this other guy came along, and there you have it. Maybe I didn't have the answer, but now I had something.

Molly met my plane, a pleasant surprise, since she was supposed to be buried in a mixing session. "Oh, hell," she said when I asked her about that, "they know what they're doing. Besides . . . I'll be back before they lock anything."

We got in her car and immediately got stuck in traffic on Century Boulevard. "What was it you wanted to tell me all this time?"

"Right here? Right now?"

Are there places you're supposed to have important discussions? This was no worse than a Pizza Hut, 1978. "Yeah."

She rested her head on my shoulder. "I'm pregnant."

My ears roared. "How long? I mean—"

"Three months now." She smiled. "I didn't know whether you'd be happy or not."

I was thinking of a lot of things all at once. How this could have been Kathleen and me. Should have been. How that memory and all my memories . . . and all of Molly's memories, and all of our parents and grandparents . . . were never going to be lost. Thanks to Sherry's neuropeptide cocktail, we were now generation zero, with ghosts of the past and future stretching away from us.

We were all *connected.*

"I'm happy," I told her, and meant it. ●

ANGUISH

after Verlaine

Photo by Anthony Bari

Nature, nothing of you moves me,
not the hypertrophied produce
of hydroponic gardens, nor the city park
that counterfeits Sicilian countrysides,
nor the atomic fusion of suns, nor the dark abyss
between galaxies.

I laugh at Art, I laugh at Man as well, at songs,
at verse, at Greek temples and the spiral towers
that cathedrals stretch into the empty sky,
and I view with the same eye the good and the wicked.

I do not believe in God, I abjure and disavow
all thought, and as for that ancient irony, Love,
I curse anyone who speaks its name to me again.

Weary of living, yet afraid of dying, like
a lost ship, at the mercy of ebb and flow,
my soul rigs out for hideous shipwrecks.

—David Lunde

Bruce Sterling

BICYCLE REPAIRMAN

Bruce Sterling's new story is set in the same universe as the author's novelette, "Deep Eddy" (*Asimov's*, August 1993). The current story takes place in Chattanooga, Tennessee, while the action in the earlier tale occurred in Düsseldorf, Germany. Mr. Sterling plans to round out this international series with a story set somewhere in Asia. He, himself, lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife and two daughters. His next novel, *Holy Fire,* will be out soon from Bantam.

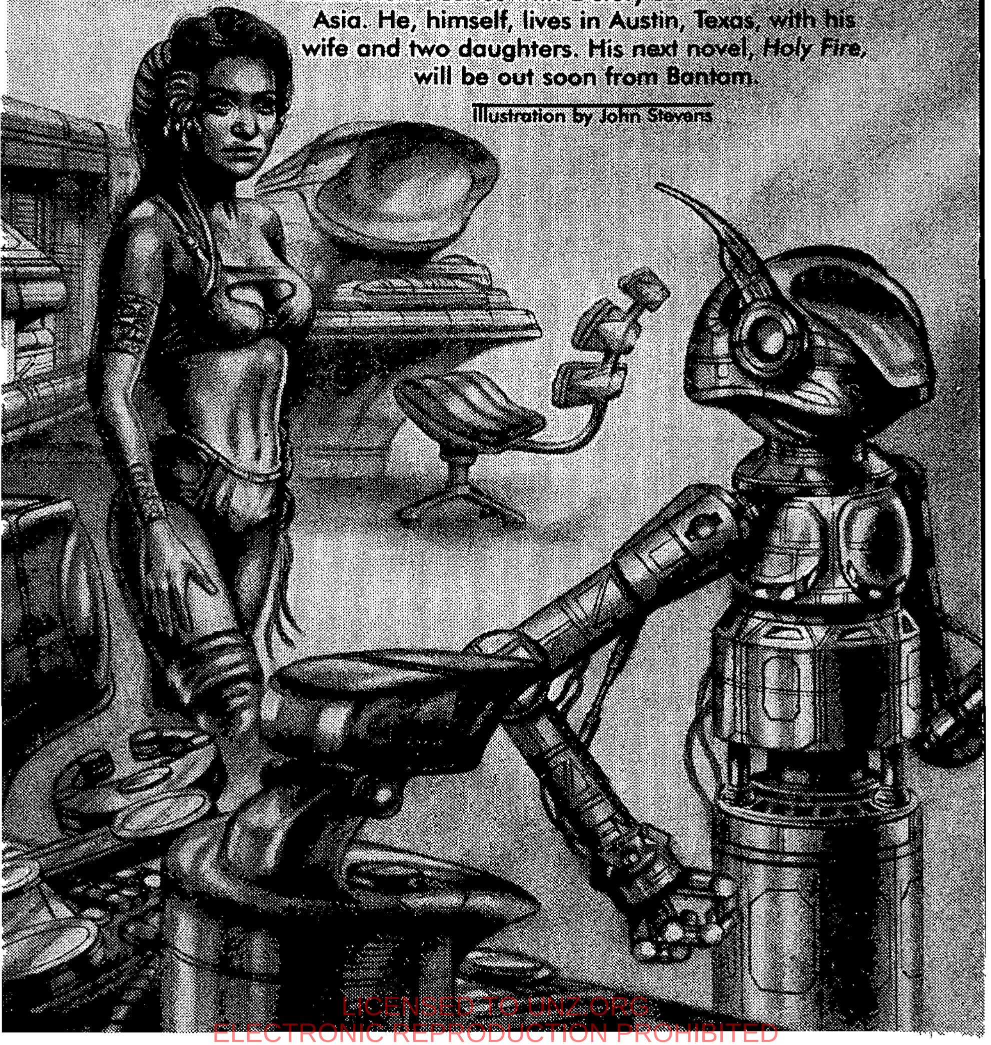
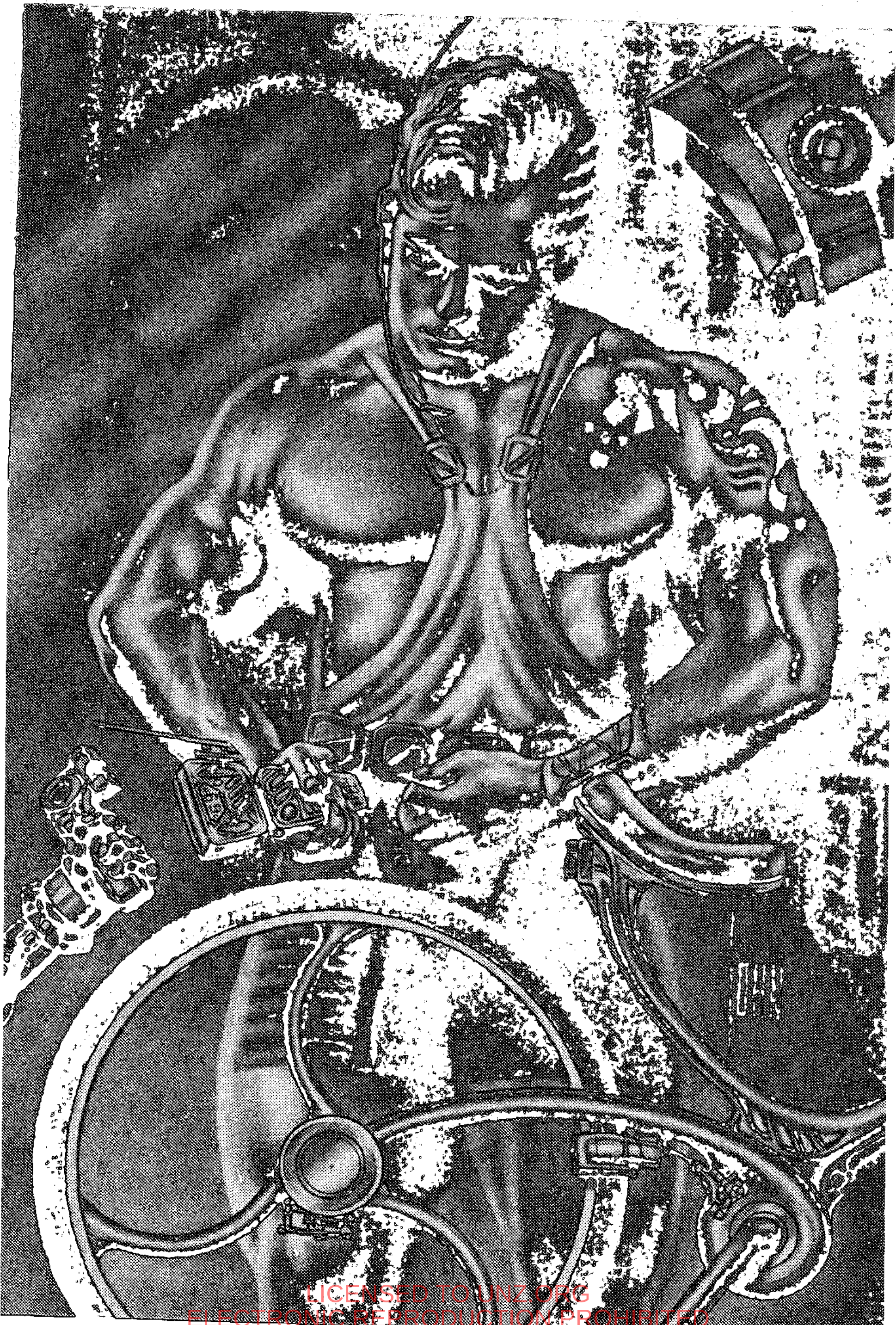


Illustration by John Stevens



Repeated tinny banging woke Lyle in his hammock. Lyle groaned, sat up, and slid free into the tool-crowded aisle of his bike shop.

Lyle hitched up the black elastic of his skintight shorts and plucked yesterday's grease-stained sleeveless off the workbench. He glanced blearily at his chronometer as he picked his way toward the door. It was 10:04:38 in the morning, June 27, 2037.

Lyle hopped over a stray can of primer and the floor boomed gently beneath his feet. With all the press of work, he'd collapsed into sleep without properly cleaning the shop. Doing custom enameling paid okay, but it ate up time like crazy. Working and living alone was wearing him out.

Lyle opened the shop door, revealing a long sheer drop to dusty tiling far below. Pigeons darted beneath the hull of his shop through a soot-stained hole in the broken atrium glass, and wheeled off to their rookery somewhere in the darkened guts of the highrise.

More banging. Far below, a uniformed delivery kid stood by his cargo tricycle, yanking rhythmically at the long dangling string of Lyle's spotwelded doorknocker.

Lyle waved, yawning. From his vantage-point below the huge girders of the cavernous atrium, Lyle had a fine overview of three burnt-out interior levels of the old Tsatanuga Archiplat. Once-elegant handrails and battered pedestrian overlooks fronted on the great airy cavity of the atrium. Behind the handrails was a three-floor wilderness of jury-rigged lights, chicken coops, water tanks, and squatters' flags. The fire-damaged floors, walls, and ceilings were riddled with handmade descent-chutes, long coiling staircases, and rickety ladders.

Lyle took note of a crew of Chattanooga demolition workers in their yellow detox suits. The repair crew were deploying vacuum scrubbers and a high-pressure hose off by the vandalproofed western elevators of Floor 34. Two or three days a week, the city crew meandered into the damage zone to pretend to work, with a great hypocritical show of sawhorses and barrier-tape. The lazy sons of bitches were all on the take.

Lyle thumbed the brake switches in their big metal box by the flywheel. The bike shop slithered, with a subtle hiss of cable-clamps, down three stories, to dock with a grating crunch onto four concrete-filled metal drums.

The delivery kid looked real familiar. He was in and out of the zone pretty often. Lyle had once done some custom work on the kid's cargo trike, new shocks and some granny-gearing as he recalled, but he couldn't remember the kid's name. Lyle was terrible with names. "What's up, zude?"

"Hard night, Lyle?"

"Just real busy."

The kid's nose wrinkled at the stench from the shop. "Doin' a lot of paint work, huh?" He glanced at his palmtop notepad. "You still taking deliveries for Edward Dertouzas?"

"Yeah. I guess so." Lyle rubbed the gear-tattoo on one stubbled cheek. "If I have to."

The kid offered a stylus, reaching up. "Can you sign for him?"

Lyle folded his bare arms warily. "Naw, man, I can't sign for Deep Eddy. Eddy's in Europe somewhere. Eddy left months ago. Haven't seen Eddy in ages."

The delivery kid scratched his sweating head below his billed fabric cap. He turned to check for any possible sneak-ups by snatch-and-grab artists out of the squatter warrens. The government simply refused to do postal delivery on the 32nd, 33rd, and 34th floors. You never saw many cops inside the zone, either. Except for the city demolition crew, about the only official functionaries who ever showed up in the zone were a few psychotically empathetic NAFTA social workers.

"I'll get a bonus if you sign for this thing." The kid gazed up in squint-eyed appeal. "It's gotta be worth something, Lyle. It's a really weird kind of routing, they paid a lot of money to send it just that way."

Lyle crouched down in the open doorway. "Let's have a look at it."

The package was a heavy shockproof rectangle in heat-sealed plastic shrink-wrap, with a plethora of intra-European routing-stickers. To judge by all the overlays, the package had been passed from postal-system to postal-system at least eight times before officially arriving in the legal custody of any human being. The return address, if there had ever been one, was completely obscured. Someplace in France, maybe.

Lyle held the box up two-handed to his ear and shook it. Hardware.

"You gonna sign, or not?"

"Yeah." Lyle scratched illegibly at the little signature panel, then looked at the delivery trike. "You oughta get that front wheel trued."

The kid shrugged. "Got anything to send out today?"

"Naw," Lyle grumbled, "I'm not doing mail-order repair work anymore, it's too complicated and I get ripped-off too much."

"Suit yourself." The kid clambered into the recumbent seat of his trike and pedaled off across the heat-cracked ceramic tiles of the atrium plaza.

Lyle hung his hand-lettered **OPEN FOR BUSINESS** sign outside the door. He walked to his left, stamped-up the pedaled lid of a jumbo garbage can, and dropped the package in with the rest of Dertouzas's stuff.

The can's lid wouldn't close shut. Deep Eddy's junk had finally reached critical mass. Deep Eddy never got much mail at the shop from other people, but Deep Eddy was always sending mail to himself. Big packets of encrypted diskettes were always arriving from Eddy's road jaunts in Toulouse, Marseilles, Valencia, and Nice. And especially Barcelona. Eddy had sent enough gigabytage out of Barcelona to outfit a pirate data-haven.

Eddy used Lyle's bike-shop as his safety-deposit box. This arrangement was okay by Lyle. He owed Eddy; Eddy had installed the phones and virching in the bike shop, and had also wangled the shop's electrical hook-up. A thick elastic curly-cable snaked out the access-crawlspace of Floor 35, right through the ceiling of Floor 34 and directly through a ragged punch-hole in the aluminum roof of Lyle's cable-mounted mobile-home. Some unknown contact of Eddy's was paying the real bills on that electrical feed. Lyle cheerfully covered the expenses by paying cash into an anonymous post-office box. The set-up was a rare and valuable contact with the world of organized authority.

During his stays in the shop, Eddy had spent much of his time buried in marathon long-distance virtuality-sessions, swaddled head to foot in lumpy strap-on gear. Eddy had been painfully involved with some older woman in Germany. A virtual romance in its full-scale, thumping, heaving, grappling progress was an embarrassment to witness. Under the circumstances, Lyle wasn't too surprised that Eddy had left his parents' condo to set up in a squat.

Eddy had lived in the bicycle repair shop, off and on, for almost a year. It had been a good deal for Lyle, because Deep Eddy had enjoyed a certain clout and prestige with the local squatters. Eddy had been a major organizer of the legendary Chattanooga Wende of December '35, a monster street-party that had climaxed in a spectacular looting-and-arson rampage that had torched the three floors of the Archiplat.

Lyle had gone to school with Eddy and had known him for years; they'd grown up together in the Archiplat. Eddy Dertouzas was a deep zude for a kid his age, with political contacts and heavy-duty network connections. The squat had been a good deal for both of them, until Eddy had finally coaxed the German woman into coming across for him in real life. Then Eddy had jumped the next plane to Europe.

Since they'd parted friends, Eddy was welcome to mail his European data-junk to the bike shop. After all, the disks were heavily encrypted, so it wasn't as if anybody in authority was ever gonna be able to read them. Storing a few thousand disks was a minor challenge, compared to Eddy's complex machine-assisted love-life.

After Eddy's sudden departure, Lyle had sold Eddy's possessions, and wired the money to Eddy in Spain. Lyle had kept the screen TV, Eddy's mediator, and the cheaper virching helmet. The way Lyle figured it—the way he remembered the deal—any stray hardware of Eddy's in the shop was rightfully his, for disposal at his own discretion. By now it was pretty clear that Deep Eddy Dertouzas was never coming back to Tennessee. And Lyle had certain debts.

Lyle snicked the blade from a roadkit multitool and cut open Eddy's package. It contained, of all things, a television cable settop box. A laughable infobahn antique. You'd never see a cablebox like that in NAFTA; this was the sort of primeval junk one might find in the home of a semiliterate Basque grandmother, or maybe in the armed bunker of some backward Albanian.

Lyle tossed the archaic cablebox onto the beanbag in front of the wallscreen. No time now for irrelevant media toys; he had to get on with real life. Lyle ducked into the tiny curtained privy and urinated at length into a crockery jar. He scraped his teeth with a flossing spudger and misted some fresh water onto his face and hands. He wiped clean with a towelette, then smeared his armpits, crotch and feet with deodorant.

Back when he'd lived with his mom up on Floor 41, Lyle had used old-fashioned antiseptic deodorants. Lyle had wised up about a lot of things once he'd escaped his mom's condo. Nowadays, Lyle used a gel roll-on of skin-friendly bacteria that greedily devoured human sweat and exuded, as their metabolic byproduct, a pleasantly harmless reek rather like ripe bananas. Life was a lot easier when you came to proper terms with your microscopic flora.

Back at his workbench, Lyle plugged-in the hot plate and boiled some Thai noodles with flaked sardines. He packed down breakfast with 400 cc's of Dr. Breasaire's Bioactive Bowel Putty. Then he checked last night's enamel job on the clamped frame in the workstand. The frame looked good. At three in the morning, Lyle was able to get into painted detail-work with just the right kind of hallucinatory clarity.

Enameling paid well, and he needed the money bad. But this wasn't real bike-work. It lacked authenticity. Enameling was all about the owner's ego—that was what really stank about enameling. There were a few rich kids up in the penthouse levels who were way-into "street aesthetic" and would pay good money to have some treadhead decorate their machine. But flash-art didn't help the bike. What helped the bike was frame alignment and sound cable-housings and proper tension in the derailleurs.

Lyle fitted the chain of his stationary-bike to the shop's flywheel, straddled up, strapped on his gloves and virching helmet, and did half an hour on the 2033 Tour de France. He stayed back in the pack for the uphill grind, and then, for three glorious minutes, he broke free from the domestiques in the peloton and came right up at the shoulder of Aldo Cipollini. The champion was a monster, posthuman. Calves like cinderblocks. Even in a cheap simulation with no full-impact bodysuit, Lyle knew better than to try to take Cipollini.

Lyle de-virched, checked his heart rate record on the chronometer, then dismounted from his stationary trainer and drained a half-liter squeezebottle of antioxidant carbo refresher. Life had been easier when he'd had a partner in crime. The shop's flywheel was slowly losing its storage of inertia-power these days, with just one zude pumping it.

Lyle's disastrous second roommate had come from the biking crowd. She was a criterium racer from Kentucky named Brigitte Rohannon.

Lyle himself had been a wannabe criterium racer for a while, before he'd blown out a kidney on steroids. He hadn't expected any trouble from Brigitte, because Brigitte knew about bikes, and she needed his technical help for her racer, and she wouldn't mind pumping the flywheel, and besides, Brigitte was lesbian. In the training gym and out at racing events, Brigitte came across as a quiet and disciplined little politicized treadhead person.

Life inside the zone, though, massively fertilized Brigitte's eccentricities. First, she started breaking training. Then she stopped eating right. Pretty soon the shop was creaking and rocking with all-night girl-on-girl hot-oil sessions, which degenerated into hooting pill-orgies with heavily tattooed zone chyx who played klaxonized bongo music, and beat each other up, and stole Lyle's tools. It had been a big relief when Brigitte finally left the zone to shack-up with some well-to-do admirer on Floor 37. The debacle had left Lyle's tenuous finances in ruin.

Lyle laid down a new tracery of scarlet enamel on the bike's chainstay, seat post, and stem. He had to wait for the work to cure, so he left the workbench, picked up Eddy's settopper and popped the shell with a hexkey. Lyle was no electrician, but the insides looked harmless enough: lots of bit-eating caterpillars and cheap Algerian silicon.

He flicked on Eddy's mediator, to boot the wallscreen. Before he could try anything with the cable-box, his mother's mook pounced upon the screen.

On Eddy's giant wallscreen, the mook's waxy computer-generated face looked like a plump satin pillowcase. Its bow tie was as big as a racing shoe.

"Please hold for an incoming vidcall from Andrea Schweik of Carnac Instruments," the mook uttered unctuously.

Lyle cordially despised all lowdown phonetagging artificially intelligent mooks. For a while, in his teenage years, Lyle himself had owned a mook, an off-the-shelf shareware job that he'd installed in the condo's phone. Like most mooks, Lyle's mook had one primary role: dealing with unsolicited phone calls from other people's mooks. In Lyle's case these were the creepy mooks of career counselors, school psychiatrists, truancy cops, and other official hindrances. When Lyle's mook launched and ran, it appeared online as a sly warty dwarf that drooled green ichor and talked in a basso grumble.

But Lyle hadn't given his mook the properly meticulous care-and-debugging that such fragile little constructs demanded, and eventually his cheap mook had collapsed into artificial insanity.

Once Lyle had escaped his mom's place to the squat, he had gone for the lowtech gambit and simply left his phone unplugged most of the time. But that was no real solution. He couldn't hide from his mother's capable and well-financed corporate mook, which watched with sleep-less mechanical patience for the least flicker of video dialtone off Lyle's number.

Lyle sighed and wiped the dust from the video nozzle on Eddy's mediator.

"Your mother is coming online right away," the mook assured him.

"Yeah, sure," Lyle muttered, smearing his hair into some semblance of order.

"She specifically instructed me to page her remotely at any time for an immediate response. She really wants to chat with you, Lyle."

"That's just great." Lyle couldn't remember what his mother's mook called itself. "Mr. Billy," or "Mr. Ripley," or something else really stupid. . . .

"Did you know that Marco Cengialta has just won the Liège Summer Classic?"

Lyle blinked and sat up in the beanbag. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Cengialta used a three-spoked ceramic wheel with internal liquid weighting and buckyball hubshocks." The mook paused, politely awaiting a possible conversational response. "He wore breath-thru kevlar microlock cleatshoes," it added.

Lyle hated the way a mook cataloged your personal interests and then generated relevant conversation. The machine-made intercourse was completely unhuman and yet perversely interesting, like being grabbed and buttonholed by a glossy magazine ad. It had probably taken his mother's mook all of three seconds to snag and download every conceivable statistic about the summer race in Liège.

His mother came on. She'd caught him during lunch in her office. "Lyle?"

"Hi, Mom." Lyle sternly reminded himself that this was the one person in the world who might conceivably put up bail for him. "What's on your mind?"

"Oh nothing much, just the usual." Lyle's mother shoved aside her platter of sprouts and tilapia. "I was idly wondering if you were still alive."

"Mom, it's a lot less dangerous in a squat than landlords and cops would have you believe. I'm perfectly fine. You can see that for yourself."

His mother lifted a pair of secretarial half-spex on a neck-chain, and gave Lyle the computer-assisted once-over.

Lyle pointed the mediator's lens at the shop's aluminum door. "See over there, Mom? I got myself a shock-baton in here. If I get any trouble from anybody, I'll just yank that club off the doormount and give the guy fifteen thousand volts!"

"Is that legal, Lyle?"

"Sure. The voltage won't kill you or anything, it just knocks you out a good long time. It also soaks the burglar down with a bright green dye that won't come off for three days. I traded a good bike for that shock-baton, it's got a lot of useful defensive features."

"That sounds really dreadful."

"The baton's harmless, Mom. You should see what the cops carry nowadays."

"Are you still taking those injections, Lyle?"

"Which injections?"

She frowned. "You know which ones."

Lyle shrugged. "The treatments are perfectly safe. They're a lot safer than a lifestyle of cruising for dates, that's for sure."

"Especially dates with the kind of girls who live down there in the riot zone, I suppose." His mother winced. "I had some hopes when you took up with that nice bike-racer girl. Brigitte, wasn't it? Whatever happened to her?"

Lyle shook his head. "Someone with your gender and background oughta understand how important the treatments are, Mom. It's a basic reproductive-freedom issue. Antilibidinals give you real freedom, freedom from the urge to reproduce. You should be glad I'm not sexually involved."

"I don't mind that you're not involved, Lyle, it's just that it seems like a real cheat that you're not even *interested.*"

"But Mom, nobody's interested in me, either. Nobody. No woman is banging at my door to have sex with a self-employed fanatical dropout bike mechanic who lives in a slum. If that ever happens, you'll be the first to know."

Lyle grinned cheerfully into the lens. "I had girlfriends back when I was in racing. I've been there, Mom. I've done that. Unless you're coked to the gills with hormones, sex is a major waste of your time and attention. Sexual Deliberation is the greatest civil-liberties movement of modern times."

"That's really weird, Lyle. It's just not natural."

"Mom, forgive me, but you're not the one to talk about natural, okay? You grew me from a zygote when you were fifty-five." He shrugged. "I'm too busy for romance now. I just want to learn about bikes."

"You were working with bikes when you lived here with me. You had a real job and a safe home where you could take regular showers."

"Sure, I was working, but I never said I wanted a *job,* Mom. I said I wanted to *learn about bikes.* There's a big difference! I can't be a loser wage-slave for some lousy bike franchise."

His mother said nothing.

"Mom, I'm not asking you for any favors. I don't need any bosses, or any teachers, or any landlords, or any cops. It's just me and my bike work down here. I know that people in authority can't stand it that a twenty-four-year-old man lives an independent life and does exactly what he wants, but I'm being very quiet and discreet about it, so nobody needs to bother about me."

His mother sighed, defeated. "Are you eating properly, Lyle? You look peaked."

Lyle lifted his calf muscle into camera range. "Look at this leg! Does that look like the gastrocnemius of a weak and sickly person?"

"Could you come up to the condo and have a decent meal with me sometime?"

Lyle blinked. "When?"

"Wednesday, maybe? We could have pork chops."

"Maybe, Mom. Probably. I'll have to check. I'll get back to you, okay? Bye." Lyle hung up.

Hooking the mediator's cable to the primitive settop box was a problem, but Lyle was not one to be stymied by a merely mechanical challenge. The enamel job had to wait as he resorted to miniclamps and a cable cutter. It was a handy thing that working with modern brake cabling had taught him how to splice fiber optics.

When the settop box finally came on-line, its array of services was a joke. Any decent modern mediator could navigate through vast information spaces, but the settop box offered nothing but "channels." Lyle had forgotten that you could even obtain old-fashioned "channels" from the city fiber feed in Chattanooga. But these channels were government-sponsored media, and the government was always quite a ways behind the curve in network development. Chattanooga's huge fiber bandwidth still carried the ancient government-mandated "public access channels," spooling away in their technically fossilized obscurity, far below the usual gaudy carnival of popular virching, infobahnage, demo-splintered comboards, public-service rants, mudtrufflage, remsnorkeling and commercials.

The little settop box accessed nothing but political channels. Three of them: Legislative, Judicial, and Executive. And that was the sum total, apparently. A settop box that offered nothing but NAFTA political coverage. On the legislative channel there was some kind of parliamentary debate on proper land use in Manitoba. On the judicial channel, a lawyer was haranguing judges about the stock market for air-pollution rights. On the executive channel, a big crowd of hicks were idly standing around on windblown tarmac somewhere in Louisiana waiting for something to happen.

The box didn't offer any glimpse of politics in Europe or the Sphere or the South. There were no hotspots or pips or index tagging. You couldn't look stuff up or annotate it—you just had to passively watch whatever the channel's masters chose to show you, whenever they chose to show it. This media setup was so insultingly lame and halt and primitive that it was almost perversely interesting. Kind of like peering through keyholes.

Lyle left the box on the Executive channel, because it looked conceivable that something might actually happen there. It had swiftly become clear to him that the intolerably monotonous fodder on the other two channels was about as exciting as those channels ever got. Lyle retreated to his workbench and got back to enamel work.

At length, the President of NAFTA arrived and decamped from his helicopter on the tarmac in Louisiana. A swarm of presidential bodyguards materialized out of the expectant crowd, looking simultaneously extremely busy and icily unperturbable.

Suddenly a line of text flickered up at the bottom of the screen. The text was set in a very old-fashioned computer font, chalk-white letters with little visible jagged pixel-edges. *"Look at him hunting for that camera mark,"* the subtitle read as it scrolled across the screen. *"Why wasn't he briefed properly? He looks like a stray dog!"*

The President meandered amiably across the sun-blistered tarmac, gazing from side to side, and then stopped briefly to shake the eager outstretched hand of a local politician. *"That must have hurt,"* commented the text. *"That Cajun dolt is poison in the polls."* The President chatted amiably with the local politician and an elderly harridan in a purple dress who seemed to be the man's wife. *"Get him away from those losers!"* raged the subtitle. *"Get the Man up to the podium, for the love of Mike! Where's the Chief of Staff? Doped-up on so-called smart drugs as usual? Get with your jobs, people!"*

The President looked well. Lyle had noticed that the President of NAFTA always looked well, it seemed to be a professional requirement. The big political cheeses in Europe always looked somber and intellectual, and the Sphere people always looked humble and dedicated, and the South people always looked angry and fanatical, but the NAFTA prez always looked like he'd just done a few laps in a pool and had a brisk rubdown. His large, glossy, bluffly cheerful face was discreetly stenciled with tattoos: both cheeks, a chorus lines of tatts on his forehead above both eyebrows, plus a few extra logos on his rocklike chin. A president's face was the ultimate billboard for major backers and interest-groups.

"Does he think we have all day?" the text demanded. *"What's with this dead air time? Can't anyone properly arrange a media event these days? You call this public access? You call this informing the electorate? If we'd known the infobahn would come to this, we'd have never built the thing!"*

The President meandered amiably to a podium covered with ceremonial microphones. Lyle had noticed that politicians always used a big healthy cluster of traditional big fat microphones, even though nowadays you could build working microphones the size of a grain of rice.

"Hey how y'all?" asked the President, grinning.

The crowd chorused back at him, with ragged enthusiasm.

"Let these fine folks up a bit closer," the President ordered suddenly, waving airily at his phalanx of bodyguards. "Y'all come on up closer, everybody! Sit right on the ground, we're all just folks here today." The

President smiled benignly as the sweating, straw-hatted summer crowd hustled up to join him, scarcely believing their luck.

"Marietta and I just had a heck of a fine lunch down in Opelousas," commented the President, patting his flat, muscular belly. He deserted the fiction of his official podium to energetically press the Louisianan flesh. As he moved from hand to grasping hand, his every word was picked up infallibly by an invisible mike, probably implanted in one of his molars. "We had dirty rice, red beans—were they hot!—and crawdads big enough to body-slam a Maine lobster!" He chuckled. "What a sight them mudbugs were! Can y'all believe that?"

The President's guards were unobtrusively but methodically working the crowd with portable detectors and sophisticated spex equipment. They didn't look very concerned by the President's supposed change in routine.

"I see he's gonna run with the usual genetics malarkey," commented the subtitle.

"Y'all have got a perfect right to be mighty proud of the agriculture in this state," intoned the President. "Y'all's agro-science know-how is second to none! Sure, I know there's a few pointy-headed Luddites up in the snowbelt, who say they prefer their crawdads dinky."

Everyone laughed.

"Folks, I got nothin' against that attitude. If some jasper wants to spend his hard-earned money buyin' and peelin' and shuckin' those little dinky ones, that's all right by me and Marietta. Ain't that right, honey?"

The First Lady smiled and waved one power-gloved hand.

"But folks, you and I both know that those whiners who waste our time complaining about 'natural food' have never sucked a mudbug head in their lives! 'Natural,' my left elbow! Who are they tryin' to kid? Just 'cause you're country, don't mean you can't hack DNA!"

"He's been working really hard on the regional accents," commented the text. *"Not bad for a guy from Minnesota. But look at that sloppy, incompetent camera work! Doesn't anybody care anymore? What on earth is happening to our standards?"*

By lunchtime, Lyle had the final coat down on the enamelling job. He ate a bowl of triticale mush and chewed up a mineral-rich handful of iodized sponge.

Then he settled down in front of the wallscreen to work on the inertia brake. Lyle knew there was big money in the inertia brake—for somebody, somewhere, sometime. The device smelled like the future.

Lyle tucked a jeweler's loupe in one eye and toyed methodically with the brake. He loved the way the piezoplastic clamp and rim transmuted braking energy into electrical battery storage. At last, a way to capture the energy you lost in braking and put it to solid use. It was almost, but not quite, magical.

The way Lyle figured it, there was gonna be a big market someday for an inertia brake that captured energy and then fed it back through the chaindrive in ways that just felt like human pedaling energy, in a direct and intuitive and muscular way, not clunky and buzzy like some loser battery-powered moped. If the system worked out right, it would make the rider feel completely natural and yet subtly superhuman at the same time. And it had to be simple, the kind of system a shop guy could fix with hand tools. It wouldn't work if it was too brittle and fancy, it just wouldn't feel like an authentic bike.

Lyle had a lot of ideas about the design. He was pretty sure he could get a real grip on the problem, if only he weren't being worked to death just keeping the shop going. If he could get enough capital together to assemble the prototypes and do some serious field tests.

It would have to be chip-driven, of course, but true to the biking spirit at the same time. A lot of bikes had chips in them nowadays, in the shocks or the braking or in reactive hubs, but bicycles simply weren't like computers. Computers were black-boxes inside, no big visible working parts. People, by contrast, got sentimental about their bike gear. People were strangely reticent and traditional about bikes. That's why the bike market had never really gone for recumbents, even though the recumbent design had a big mechanical advantage. People didn't like their bikes too complicated. They didn't want bicycles to bitch and complain and whine for attention and constant upgrading the way that computers did. Bikes were too personal. People wanted their bikes to wear.

Someone banged at the shop door.

Lyle opened it. Down on the tiling by the barrels stood a tall brunette woman in stretch shorts, with a short-sleeve blue pullover and a ponytail. She had a bike under one arm, an old lacquer-and-paper-framed Taiwanese job. "Are you Edward Dertouzas?" she said, gazing up at him.

"No," Lyle said patiently. "Eddy's in Europe."

She thought this over. "I'm new in the zone," she confessed. "Can you fix this bike for me? I just bought it secondhand and I think it kinda needs some work."

"Sure," Lyle said. "You came to the right guy for that job, ma'am, because Eddy Dertouzas couldn't fix a bike for hell. Eddy just used to live here. I'm the guy who actually owns this shop. Hand the bike up."

Lyle crouched down, got a grip on the handlebar stem and hauled the bike into the shop. The woman gazed up at him respectfully. "What's your name?"

"Lyle Schweik."

"I'm Kitty Casaday." She hesitated. "Could I come up inside there?"

Lyle reached down, gripped her muscular wrist, and hauled her up into the shop. She wasn't all that good-looking, but she was in really good shape—like a mountain biker or triathlon runner. She looked about thirty-five. It was hard to tell, exactly. Once people got into cosmetic surgery and serious bio-maintenance, it got pretty hard to judge their age. Unless you got a good, close medical exam of their eyelids and cuticles and internal membranes and such.

She looked around the shop with great interest, brown ponytail twitching. "Where you hail from?" Lyle asked her. He had already forgotten her name.

"Well, I'm originally from Juneau, Alaska."

"Canadian, huh? Great. Welcome to Tennessee."

"Actually, Alaska used to be part of the United States."

"You're kidding," Lyle said skeptically. "Hey, I'm no historian, but I've seen Alaska on a map before."

"You've got a whole working shop and everything built inside this old place! That's really something, Mr. Schweik. What's behind that curtain?"

"The spare room," Lyle said. "That's where my roommate used to stay."

She glanced up. "Dertouzas?"

"Yeah, him."

"Who's in there now?"

"Nobody," Lyle said sadly. "I got some storage stuff in there."

She nodded slowly, and kept looking around, apparently galvanized with curiosity. "What are you running on that screen?"

"Hard to say, really," Lyle said. He crossed the room, bent down and switched off the settop box. "Some kind of weird political crap."

He began examining her bike. All its serial numbers had been removed. Typical zone bike.

"The first thing we got to do," he said briskly, "is fit it to you properly: set the saddle height, pedal stroke, and handlebars. Then I'll adjust the tension, true the wheels, check the brakepads and suspension valves, tune the shifting, and lubricate the drivetrain. The usual. You're gonna need a better saddle than this—this saddle's for a male pelvis." He looked up. "You got a charge card?"

She nodded, then frowned. "But I don't have much credit left."

"No problem." He flipped open a dog-eared catalog. "This is what you need. Any halfway decent gel-saddle. Pick one you like, and we can have it shipped in by tomorrow morning. And then . . ." he flipped pages—"order me one of these."

She stepped closer and examined the page. "The 'cotterless crank-bolt ceramic wrench set,' is that it?"

"That's right. I fix your bike, you give me those tools, and we're even."

"Okay. Sure. That's cheap!" She smiled at him. "I like the way you do business, Lyle."

"You'll get used to barter, if you stay in the zone long enough."

"I've never lived in a squat before," she said thoughtfully. "I like the attitude here, but people say that squats are pretty dangerous."

"I dunno about the squats in other towns, but Chattanooga squats aren't dangerous, unless you think anarchists are dangerous, and anarchists aren't dangerous unless they're really drunk." Lyle shrugged. "People will steal your stuff all the time, that's about the worst part. There's a couple of tough guys around here who claim they have handguns. I never saw anybody actually use a handgun. Old guns aren't hard to find, but it takes a real chemist to make working ammo nowadays." He smiled back at her. "Anyway, you look to me like you can take care of yourself."

"I take dance classes."

Lyle nodded. He opened a drawer and pulled out a tape measure.

"I saw all those cables and pulleys you have on top of this place. You can pull the whole building right up off the ground, huh? Kind of hang it right off the ceiling up there."

"That's right, it saves a lot of trouble with people breaking and entering." Lyle glanced at his shock-baton, in its mounting at the door. She followed his gaze to the weapon and then looked at him, impressed.

Lyle measured her arms, torso length, then knelt and measured her inseam from crotch to floor. He took notes. "Okay," he said. "Come by tomorrow afternoon."

"Lyle?"

"Yeah?" He stood up.

"Do you rent this place out? I really need a safe place to stay in the zone."

"I'm sorry," Lyle said politely, "but I hate landlords and I'd never be one. What I need is a roommate who can really get behind the whole concept of my shop. Someone who's qualified, you know, to develop my infrastructure or do bicycle work. Anyway, if I took your cash or charged you for rent, then the tax people would just have another excuse to harass me."

"Sure, okay, but . . ." She paused, then looked at him under lowered eyelids. "I've gotta be a lot better than having this place go empty."

Lyle stared at her, astonished.

"I'm a pretty useful woman to have around, Lyle. Nobody's ever complained before."

"Really?"

"That's right." She stared at him boldly.

"I'll think about your offer," Lyle said. "What did you say your name was?"

"I'm Kitty. Kitty Casaday."

"Kitty, I got a whole lot of work to do today, but I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay, Lyle." She smiled. "You think about me, all right?"

Lyle helped her down out of the shop. He watched her stride away across the atrium until she vanished through the crowded doorway of "The Crowbar," a squat coffeeshop. Then he called his mother.

"Did you forget something?" his mother said, looking up from her workscreen.

"Mom, I know this is really hard to believe, but a strange woman just banged on my door and offered to have sex with me."

"You're kidding, right?"

"In exchange for room and board, I think. Anyway, I said you'd be the first to know if it happened."

"Lyle—" His mother hesitated. "Lyle, I think you better come right home. Let's make that dinner date for tonight, okay? We'll have a little talk about this situation."

"Yeah, okay. I got an enameling job I gotta deliver to Floor 41, anyway."

"I don't have a positive feeling about this development, Lyle."

"That's okay, Mom. I'll see you tonight."

Lyle reassembled the newly enameled bike. Then he set the flywheel onto remote, and stepped outside the shop. He mounted the bike, and touched a password into the remote control. The shop faithfully reeled itself far out of reach and hung there in space below the fire-blackened ceiling, swaying gently.

Lyle pedaled away, back toward the elevators, back toward the neighborhood where he'd grown up.

He delivered the bike to the delighted young idiot who'd commissioned it, stuffed the cash in his shoes, and then went down to his mother's. He took a shower, shaved, and shampooed thoroughly. They had pork chops and grits and got drunk together. His mother complained about the breakup with her third husband and wept bitterly, but not as much as usual when this topic came up. Lyle got the strong impression she was thoroughly on the mend and would be angling for number four in pretty short order.

Around midnight, Lyle refused his mother's ritual offers of new clothes and fresh leftovers, and headed back down to the zone. He was still a little clubfooted from his mother's sherry, and he stood breathing beside the broken glass of the atrium wall, gazing out at the city-smeared summer stars. The cavernous darkness inside the zone at night was one of his favorite things about the place. The queasy twenty-four-hour security lighting in the rest of the archiplat had never been rebuilt inside the zone.

The zone always got livelier at night when all the normal people started sneaking in to cruise the zone's unlicensed dives and nitespots, but all that activity took place behind discreetly closed doors. Enticing squiggles of red-and-blue chemglow here and there only enhanced the blessed unnatural gloom.

Lyle pulled his remote control and ordered the shop back down.

The door of the shop had been broken open.

Lyle's latest bike-repair client lay sprawled on the floor of the shop, unconscious. She was wearing black military fatigues, a knit cap and rappelling gear.

She had begun her break-in at Lyle's establishment by pulling his shock-baton out of its glowing security socket beside the doorframe. The booby-trapped baton had immediately put fifteen thousand volts through her, and sprayed her face with a potent mix of dye and street-legal incapacitants.

Lyle turned the baton off with the remote control, and then placed it carefully back in its socket. His surprise guest was still breathing, but was clearly in real metabolic distress. He tried clearing her nose and mouth with a tissue. The guys who'd sold him the baton hadn't been kidding about the "indelible" part. Her face and throat were drenched with green and her chest looked like a spin-painting.

Her elaborate combat spex had partially shielded her eyes. With the spex off she looked like a viridian green raccoon.

Lyle tried stripping her gear off in conventional fashion, realized this wasn't going to work, and got a pair of metal-shears from the shop. He snipped his way through the eerily writhing power-gloves and the kevlar laces of the pneumoreactive combat boots. Her black turtleneck had an abrasive surface and a cuirass over chest and back that looked like it could stop small-arms fire.

The trousers had nineteen separate pockets and they were loaded with all kinds of eerie little items: a matte-black electrode stun-weapon, flash capsules, fingerprint dust, a utility pocketknife, drug adhesives, plastic handcuffs, some pocket change, worry beads, a comb, and a make-up case.

Close inspection revealed a pair of tiny microphone amplifiers inserted in her ear canals. Lyle fetched the tiny devices out with needlenose pliers. Lyle was getting pretty seriously concerned by this point. He shackled her arms and legs with bike security cable, in case she regained consciousness and attempted something superhuman.

Around four in the morning she had a coughing fit and began shivering violently. Summer nights could get pretty cold in the shop. Lyle thought over the design problem for some time, and then fetched a big heat-reflective blanket out of the empty room. He cut a neat poncho-hole in the center of it, and slipped her head through it. He got the bike-cables off her—she could probably slip the cables anyway—and sewed all four edges of the blanket shut from the outside, with sturdy monofilament thread from his saddle-stitcher. He sewed the poncho edges to a tough fabric belt, cinched the belt snugly around her neck, and padlocked it. When he was done, he'd made a snug bag that contained her entire body, except for her head, which had begun to drool and snore.

A fat blob of superglue on the bottom of the bag kept her anchored to the shop's floor. The blanket was cheap but tough upholstery fabric. If she could rip her way through blanket-fabric with her fingernails alone, then he was probably a goner anyway. By now, Lyle was tired and stone sober. He had a squeezebottle of glucose rehydrator, three aspirin, and a canned chocolate pudding. Then he climbed in his hammock and went to sleep.

Lyle woke up around ten. His captive was sitting up inside the bag, her green face stony, eyes red-rimmed, and brown hair caked with dye. Lyle got up, dressed, ate breakfast, and fixed the broken door-lock. He said nothing, partly because he thought that silence would shake her up, but mostly because he couldn't remember her name. He was almost sure it wasn't her real name anyway.

When he'd finished fixing the door, he reeled up the string of the door-knocker so that it was far out of reach. He figured the two of them needed the privacy.

Then Lyle deliberately fired up the wallscreen and turned on the set-top box. As soon as the peculiar subtitles started showing up again, she grew agitated.

"Who are you really?" she demanded at last.

"Ma'am, I'm a bicycle repairman."

She snorted.

"I guess I don't need to know your name," he said, "but I need to know who your people are, and why they sent you here, and what I've got to do to get out of this situation."

"You're not off to a good start, mister."

"No," he said, "maybe not, but you're the one who's blown it. I'm just a twenty-four-year-old bicycle repairman from Tennessee. But you, you've got enough specialized gear on you to buy my whole place five times over."

He flipped open the little mirror in her make-up case and showed her her own face. Her scowl grew a little stiffer below the spattering of green.

"I want you to tell me what's going on here," he said.

"Forget it."

"If you're waiting for your backup to come rescue you, I don't think they're coming," Lyle said. "I searched you very thoroughly and I've opened up every single little gadget you had, and I took all the batteries out. I'm not even sure what some of those things are or how they work, but hey, I know what a battery is. It's been hours now. So I don't think your backup people even know where you are."

She said nothing.

"See," he said, "You've really blown it bad. You got caught by a total amateur, and now you're in a hostage situation that could go on indefinitely. I got enough water and noodles and sardines to live up here for days. I dunno, maybe you can make a cellular phone-call to God off some gizmo implanted in your thighbone, but it looks to me like you've got serious problems."

She shuffled around a bit inside the bag and looked away.

"It's got something to do with the cable box over there, right?"

She said nothing.

"For what it's worth, I don't think that box has anything to do with me or Eddy Dertouzas," Lyle said. "I think it was probably meant for Eddy, but I don't think he asked anybody for it. Somebody just wanted him to have it, probably one of his weird European contacts. Eddy used to be in this political group called CAPCLUG, ever heard of them?"

It looked pretty obvious that she'd heard of them.

"I never liked 'em much either," Lyle told her. "They kind of snagged me at first with their big talk about freedom and civil liberties, but then you'd go to a CAPCLUG meeting up in the penthouse levels, and there were all these potbellied zudes in spex yapping-off stuff like, 'we must follow the technological imperatives or be jettisoned into the history dumpfile.' They're a bunch of useless blowhards who can't tie their own shoes."

"They're dangerous radicals subverting national sovereignty."

Lyle blinked cautiously. "Whose national sovereignty would that be?"

"Yours, mine, Mr. Schweik. I'm from NAFTA, I'm a federal agent."

"You're a fed? How come you're breaking into people's houses, then? Isn't that against the Fourth Amendment or something?"

"If you mean the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, that document was superseded years ago."

"Yeah. . . . Okay, I guess you're right." Lyle shrugged. "I missed a lot of civics classes. . . . No skin off my back anyway. I'm sorry, but what did you say your name was?"

"I said my name was Kitty Casaday."

"Right. Kitty. Okay, Kitty, just you and me, person to person. We obviously have a mutual problem here. What do you think I ought to do in this situation? I mean, speaking practically."

Kitty thought it over, surprised. "Mr. Schweik, you should release me immediately, get me my gear, and give me the box and any related data, recordings, or diskettes. Then you should escort me from the archiplat in some confidential fashion so I won't be stopped by police and questioned about the dye-stains. A new set of clothes would be very useful."

"Like that, huh?"

"That's your wisest course of action." Her eyes narrowed. "I can't make any promises, but it might affect your future treatment very favorably."

"You're not gonna tell me who you are, or where you came from, or who sent you, or what this is all about?"

"No. Under no circumstances. I'm not allowed to reveal that. You don't need to know. You're not supposed to know. And anyway, if you're really what you say you are, what should you care?"

"Plenty. I care plenty. I can't wander around the rest of my life wondering when you're going to jump me out of a dark corner."

"If I'd wanted to hurt you, I'd have hurt you when we first met, Mr. Schweik. There was no one here but you and me, and I could have easily incapacitated you and taken anything I wanted. Just give me the box and the data and stop trying to interrogate me."

"Suppose you found me breaking into your house, Kitty? What would you do to me?"

She said nothing.

"What you're telling me isn't gonna work. If you don't tell me what's really going on here," Lyle said heavily, "I'm gonna have to get tough."

Her lips thinned in contempt.

"Okay, you asked for this." Lyle opened the mediator and made a quick voice call. "Pete?"

"Nah, this is Pete's mook," the phone replied. "Can I do something for you?"

"Could you tell Pete that Lyle Schweik has some big trouble, and I need him to come over to my bike shop immediately? And bring some heavy muscle from the Spiders."

"What kind of big trouble, Lyle?"

"Authority trouble. A lot of it. I can't say any more. I think this line may be tapped."

"Right-o. I'll make that happen. Hoo-ah, zude." The mook hung up.

Lyle left the beanbag and went back to the workbench. He took Kitty's cheap bike out of the repair stand and angrily threw it aside. "You know what really bugs me?" he said at last. "You couldn't even bother to charm your way in here, set yourself up as my roommate, and then steal the damn box. You didn't even respect me that much. Heck, you didn't even have to steal anything, Kitty. You could have just smiled and asked nicely and I'd have given you the box to play with. I don't watch media, I hate all that crap."

"It was an emergency. There was no time for more extensive investigation or reconnaissance. I think you should call your gangster friends immediately and tell them you've made a mistake. Tell them not to come here."

"You're ready to talk seriously?"

"No, I won't be talking."

"Okay, we'll see."

After twenty minutes, Lyle's phone rang. He answered it cautiously, keeping the video off. It was Pete from the City Spiders. "Zude, where is your doorknocker?"

"Oh, sorry, I pulled it up, didn't want to be disturbed. I'll bring the shop right down." Lyle thumbed the brake-switches.

Lyle opened the door and Pete broadjumped into the shop. Pete was a big man but he had the skeletal, wiry build of a climber, bare dark arms and shins and big sticky-toed jumping shoes. He had a sleeveless leather bodysuit full of clips and snaps, and he carried a big fabric shoulder-bag. There were six vivid tattoos on the dark skin of his left cheek, under the black stubble.

Pete looked at Kitty, lifted his spex with wiry calloused fingers, looked at her again bare-eyed, and put the spex back in place. "Wow, Lyle."

"Yeah."

"I never thought you were into anything this sick and twisted."

"It's a serious matter, Pete."

Pete turned to the door, crouched down, and hauled a second person into the shop. She wore a beat-up air-conditioned jacket and long slacks and zipsided boots and wire-rimmed spex. She had short ratty hair under a green cloche hat. "Hi," she said, sticking out a hand. "I'm Mabel. We haven't met."

"I'm Lyle." Lyle gestured. "This is Kitty here in the bag."

"You said you needed somebody heavy, so I brought Mabel along," said Pete. "Mabel's a social worker."

"Looks like you pretty much got things under control here," said Mabel liltingly, scratching her neck and looking about the place. "What happened? She break into your shop?"

"Yeah."

"And," Pete said, "she grabbed the shock-baton first thing and blasted herself but good?"

"Exactly."

"I told you that thieves always go for the weaponry first," Pete said, grinning and scratching his armpit. "Didn't I tell you that? Leave a weapon in plain sight, man, a thief can't stand it, it's the very first thing they gotta grab." He laughed. "Works every time."

"Pete's from the City Spiders," Lyle told Kitty. "His people built this shop for me. One dark night, they hauled this mobile-home right up thirty-four stories in total darkness, straight up the side of the Archiplat without anybody seeing, and they cut a big hole through the side of the building without making any noise, and they hauled the whole shop through it. Then they sank explosive bolts through the girders and hung it up here for me in mid-air. The City Spiders are into sport-climbing the way I'm into bicycles, only, like, they are very *seriously* into climbing and there are *lots* of them. They were some of the very first people to squat the zone, and they've lived here ever since, and they are pretty good friends of mine."

Pete sank to one knee and looked Kitty in the eye. "I love breaking into places, don't you? There's no thrill like some quick and perfectly executed break-in." He reached casually into his shoulderbag. "The thing is—" he pulled out a camera—"to be sporting, you can't steal anything. You just take trophy pictures to prove you were there." He snapped her picture several times, grinning as she flinched.

"Lady," he breathed at her, "once you've turned into a little wicked greedhead, and mixed all that evil cupidity and possessiveness into the beauty of the direct action, then you've prostituted our way of life. You've gone and spoiled our sport." Pete stood up. "We City Spiders don't like common thieves. And we especially don't like thieves who break into the places of clients of ours, like Lyle here. And we thoroughly, especially, don't like thieves who are so brick-head dumb that they get caught red-handed on the premises of friends of ours."

Pete's hairy brows knotted in thought. "What I'd like to do here, Lyle ol' buddy," he announced, "is wrap-up your little friend head to foot in nice tight cabling, smuggle her out of here down to Golden Gate Archiplat—you know, the big one downtown over by MLK and Highway 27?—and hang her head-down in the center of the cupola."

"That's not very nice," Mabel told him seriously.

Pete looked wounded. "I'm not gonna charge him for it or anything! Just imagine her, spinning up there beautifully with all those chandeliers and those hundreds of mirrors."

Mabel knelt and looked into Kitty's face. "Has she had any water since she was knocked unconscious?"

"No."

"Well, for heaven's sake, give the poor woman something to drink, Lyle."

Lyle handed Mabel a bike-tote squeeze-bottle of electrolyte refresher. "You zudes don't grasp the situation yet," he said. "Look at all this stuff I took off her." He showed them the spex, and the boots, and the stungun, and the gloves, and the carbon-nitride climbing plectra, and the rappelling gear.

"Wow," Pete said at last, dabbing at buttons on his spex to study the finer detail, "this is no ordinary burglar! She's gotta be, like, a street samurai from the Mahogany Warbirds or something!"

"She says she's a federal agent."

Mabel stood up suddenly, angrily yanking the squeezebottle from Kitty's lips. "You're kidding, right?"

"Ask her."

"I'm a Grade Five social counselor with the Department of Urban Redevelopment," Mabel said. She presented Kitty with an official ID. "And who are you with?"

"I'm not prepared to divulge that information at this time."

"I can't believe this," Mabel marveled, tucking her dog-eared hologram ID back in her hat. "You've caught somebody from one of those nutty reactionary secret black-bag units. I mean, that's gotta be what's just happened here." She shook her head slowly. "Y'know, if you work in government, you always hear horror stories about these right-wing paramilitary wackos, but I've never actually seen one before."

"It's a very dangerous world out there, Miss Social Counselor."

"Oh, tell me about it," Mabel scoffed. "I've worked suicide hotlines! I've been a hostage negotiator! I'm a career social worker, girlfriend! I've seen more horror and suffering than you *ever* will. While you were doing pushups in some comfy cracker training-camp, I've been out here in the real world!" Mabel absently unscrewed the top from the bike bottle and had a long glug. "What on earth are you doing trying to raid the squat of a bicycle repairman?"

Kitty's stony silence lengthened. "It's got something to do with that settop box," Lyle offered. "It showed up here in delivery yesterday, and then she showed up just a few hours later. Started flirting with me, and said she wanted to live in here. Of course I got suspicious right away."

"Naturally," Pete said. "Real bad move, Kitty. Lyle's on antilibidinals."

Kitty stared at Lyle bitterly. "I see," she said at last. "So that's what you get, when you drain all the sex out of one of them. . . . You get a strange malodorous creature that spends all its time working in the garage."

Mabel flushed. "Did you hear that?" She gave Kitty's bag a sharp angry yank. "What conceivable right do you have to question this citizen's sexual orientation? Especially after cruelly trying to sexually manipulate him to abet your illegal purposes? Have you lost all sense of decency? You . . . you should be sued."

"Do your worst," Kitty muttered.

"Maybe I will," Mabel said grimly. "Sunlight is the best disinfectant."

"Yeah, let's string her up somewhere real sunny and public and call a bunch of news crews," Pete said. "I'm way hot for this deep ninja gear! Me and the Spiders got real mojo uses for these telescopic ears, and the tracer dust, and the epoxy bugging devices. And the press-on climbing-claws. And the carbon-fiber rope. Everything, really! Everything except these big-ass military shoes of hers, which really suck."

"Hey, all that stuff's mine," Lyle said sternly. "I saw it first."

"Yeah, I guess so, but . . . okay, Lyle, you make us a deal on the gear, we'll forget everything you still owe us for doing the shop."

"Come on, those combat spex are worth more than this place all by themselves."

"I'm real interested in that settop box," Mabel said cruelly. "It doesn't look too fancy or complicated. Let's take it over to those dirty circuit zudes who hang out at the Blue Parrot, and see if they can't reverse-engineer it. We'll post all the schematics up on twenty or thirty progressive activist networks, and see what falls out of cyberspace."

Kitty glared at her. "The terrible consequences from that stupid and irresponsible action would be entirely on your head."

"I'll risk it," Mabel said airily, patting her cloche hat. "It might bump my soft little liberal head a bit, but I'm pretty sure it would crack your nasty little fascist head like a coconut."

Suddenly Kitty began thrashing and kicking her way furiously inside the bag. They watched with interest as she ripped, tore and lashed out with powerful side and front kicks. Nothing much happened.

"All right," she said at last, panting in exhaustion. "I've come from Senator Creighton's office."

"Who?" Lyle said.

"Creighton! Senator James P. Creighton, the man who's been your senator from Tennessee for the past thirty years!"

"Oh," Lyle said. "I hadn't noticed."

"We're anarchists," Pete told her.

"I've sure heard of the nasty old geezer," Mabel said, "but I'm from British Columbia, where we change senators the way you'd change a pair of socks. If you ever changed your socks, that is. What about him?"

"Well, Senator Creighton has deep clout and seniority! He was a United States Senator even before the first NAFTA Senate was convened! He has a very large, and powerful, and very well-seasoned personal staff of twenty thousand hardworking people, with a lot of pull in the Agriculture, Banking, and Telecommunications Committees!"

"Yeah? So?"

"So," Kitty said miserably, "there are twenty thousand of us on his staff. We've been in place for decades now, and naturally we've accumulated lots of power and importance. Senator Creighton's staff is basically running some quite large sections of the NAFTA government, and if the Senator loses his office, there will be a great deal of . . . of unnecessary political turbulence." She looked up. "You might not think that a senator's staff is all that important politically. But if people like you bothered to learn anything about the real-life way that your government functions, then you'd know that senate staffers can be really crucial."

Mabel scratched her head. "You're telling me that even a lousy senator has his own private black bag unit?"

Kitty looked insulted. "He's an excellent senator! You can't have a working organization of twenty thousand staffers without taking security very seriously! Anyway, the executive wing has had black bag units for years! It's only right that there should be a balance of powers."

"Wow," Mabel said. "The old guy's a hundred and twelve or something, isn't he?"

"A hundred and seventeen."

"Even with government health care, there can't be a lot left of him."

"He's already gone," Kitty muttered. "His frontal lobes are burned out. . . . He can still sit up, and if he's stoked on stimulants he can repeat whatever's whispered to him. So he's got two permanent implanted hearing aids, and basically . . . well . . . he's being run by remote control by his mook."

"His mook, huh?" Pete repeated thoughtfully.

"It's a very good mook," Kitty said. "The coding's old, but it's been very well looked after. It has firm moral values and excellent policies. The mook is really very much like the Senator was. It's just that . . . well, it's old. It still prefers a really old-fashioned media environment. It spends almost all its time watching old-fashioned public political coverage, and lately it's gotten cranky and started broadcasting commentary."

"Man, never trust a mook," Lyle said. "I hate those things."

"So do I," Pete offered, "but even a mook comes off pretty good compared to a politician."

"I don't really see the problem," Mabel said, puzzled. "Senator Hirschheimer from Arizona has had a direct neural link to his mook for years, and he has an excellent progressive voting record. Same goes for Senator Marmalejo from Tamaulipas, she's kind of absent-minded, and everybody knows she's on life-support, but she's a real scrapper on women's issues."

Kitty looked up. "You don't think it's terrible?"

Mabel shook her head. "I'm not one to be judgmental about the intimacy of one's relationship to one's own digital alter-ego. As far as I can see it, that's a basic privacy issue."

"They told me in briefing that it was a very terrible business, and that everyone would panic if they learned that a high government official was basically a front for a rogue artificial intelligence."

Mabel, Pete and Lyle exchanged glances. "Are you guys surprised by that news?" Mabel said.

"Heck no," said Pete. "Big deal," Lyle added.

Something seemed to snap inside Kitty then. Her head sank. "Disaffected émigrés in Europe have been spreading boxes that can decipher the Senator's commentary. I mean, the Senator's mook's commentary. . . . The mook speaks just like the Senator did, or the way the Senator used to speak, when he was in private and off the record. The way he spoke in his diaries. As far as we can tell, the mook *was* his diary. . . . It used to be his personal laptop computer. But he just kept transferring the files, and upgrading the software, and teaching it new tricks like voice recognition and speech writing, and giving it power of attorney and such. . . . And then, one day the mook made a break for it. We think that the mook sincerely believes that it's the Senator."

"Just tell the stupid thing to shut up for a while, then."

"We can't do that. We're not even sure where the mook is, physically. Or how it's been encoding those sarcastic comments into the video feed. The Senator had a lot of friends in the telecom industry back in the old days. There are a lot of ways and places to hide a piece of distributed software."

"So that's all?" Lyle said. "That's it, that's your big secret? Why didn't you just come to me and ask me for the box? You didn't have to dress up in combat gear and kick my door in. That's a pretty good story, I'd have probably just given you the thing."

"I couldn't do that, Mr. Schweik."

"Why not?"

"Because," Pete said, "her people are important government functionaries, and you're a loser techie wacko who lives in a slum."

"I was told this is a very dangerous area," Kitty muttered.

"It's not dangerous," Mabel told her.

"No?"

"No. They're all too broke to be dangerous. This is just a kind of social breathing space. The whole urban infrastructure's dreadfully overplanned here in Chattanooga. There's been too much money here too long. There's been no room for spontaneity. It was choking the life out of the city. That's why everyone was secretly overjoyed when the rioters set fire to these three floors."

Mabel shrugged. "The insurance took care of the damage. First the looters came in. Then there were a few hideouts for kids and crooks and illegal aliens. Then the permanent squats got set up. Then the artists' studios, and the semilegal workshops and red-light places. Then the quaint little coffeehouses, then the bakeries. Pretty soon the offices of professionals will be filtering in, and they'll restore the water and the wiring. Once that happens, the real-estate prices will kick in big-time, and the whole zone will transmute right back into gentryville. It happens all the time."

Mabel waved her arm at the door. "If you knew anything about modern urban geography, you'd see this kind of, uh, spontaneous urban renewal happening all over the place. As long as you've got naïve young people with plenty of energy who can be suckered into living inside rotten, hazardous dumps for nothing, in exchange for imagining that they're free from oversight, then it all works out just great in the long run."

"Oh."

"Yeah, zones like this turn out to be extremely handy for all concerned. For some brief span of time, a few people can think mildly unusual thoughts and behave in mildly unusual ways. All kinds of weird little vermin show up, and if they make any money then they go legal, and if they don't, then they drop dead in a place really quiet where it's all their own fault. Nothing dangerous about it." Mabel laughed, then sobered. "Lyle, let this poor dumb cracker out of the bag."

"She's naked under there."

"Okay," she said impatiently, "cut a slit in the bag and throw some clothes in it. Get going, Lyle."

Lyle threw in some biking pants and a sweatshirt.

"What about my gear?" Kitty demanded, wriggling her way into the clothes by feel.

"I tell you what," said Mabel thoughtfully. "Pete here will give your gear back to you in a week or so, after his friends have photographed all the circuitry. You'll just have to let him keep all those knickknacks for a while, as his reward for our not immediately telling everybody who you are and what you're doing here."

"Great idea," Pete announced, "terrific, pragmatic solution!" He began feverishly snatching up gadgets and stuffing them into his shoulderbag. "See, Lyle? One phonecall to good ol' Spider Pete, and your problem is history, zude! Me and Mabel-the-Fed have crisis negotiation skills that are second to none! Another potentially lethal confrontation resolved without any bloodshed or loss of life." Pete zipped the bag shut. "That's about it, right, everybody? Problem over! Write if you get work, Lyle buddy. Hang by your thumbs." Pete leapt out the door and bounded off at top speed on the springy soles of his reactive boots.

"Thanks a lot for placing my equipment into the hands of sociopathic criminals," Kitty said. She reached out of the slit in the bag, grabbed a multitool off the corner of the workbench, and began swiftly slashing her way free.

"This will help the sluggish, corrupt and underpaid Chattanooga police to take life a little more seriously," Mabel said, her pale eyes gleaming. "Besides, it's profoundly undemocratic to restrict specialized technical knowledge to the coercive hands of secret military elites."

Kitty thoughtfully thumbed the edge of the multitool's ceramic blade and stood up to her full height, her eyes slitted. "I'm ashamed to work for the same government as you."

Mabel smiled serenely. "Darling, your tradition of deep dark government paranoia is far behind the times! This is the postmodern era! We're now in the grip of a government with severe schizoid multiple-personality disorder."

"You're truly vile. I despise you more than I can say." Kitty jerked her thumb at Lyle. "Even this nutcase eunuch anarchist kid looks pretty good, compared to you. At least he's self-sufficient and market-driven."

"I thought he looked good the moment I met him," Mabel replied sunnily. "He's cute, he's got great muscle tone and he doesn't make passes. Plus he can fix small appliances and he's got a spare apartment. I think you ought to move in with him, sweetheart."

"What's that supposed to mean? You don't think I could manage life here in the zone like you do, is that it? You think you have some kind of copyright on living outside the law?"

"No, I just mean you'd better stay indoors with your boyfriend here until that paint falls off your face. You look like a poisoned raccoon." Mabel turned on her heel. "Try to get a life, and stay out of my way." She leapt outside, unlocked her bicycle and methodically pedaled off.

Kitty wiped her lips and spat out the door. "Christ, that baton packs a wallop." She snorted. "Don't you ever ventilate this place, kid? Those paint fumes are gonna kill you before you're thirty."

"I don't have time to clean or ventilate it. I'm real busy."

"Okay, then I'll clean it. I'll ventilate it. I gotta stay here a while, understand? Maybe quite a while."

Lyle blinked. "How long, exactly?"

Kitty stared at him. "You're not taking me seriously, are you? I don't much like it when people don't take me seriously."

"No, no," Lyle assured her hastily. "You're very serious."

"You ever heard of a small business grant, kid? How about venture capital, did you ever hear of that? Ever heard of federal research and development subsidies, Mr. Schweik?" Kitty looked at him sharply, weighing her words. "Yeah, I thought maybe you'd heard of that one, Mr. Techie Wacko. Federal R&D backing is the kind of thing that only happens to other people, right? But Lyle, when you make good friends with a senator, you *become* 'other people.' Get my drift, pal?"

"I guess I do," Lyle said slowly.

"We'll have ourselves some nice talks about that subject, Lyle. You wouldn't mind that, would you?"

"No. I don't mind it now that you're talking."

"There's some stuff going on down here in the zone that I didn't understand at first, but it's important." Kitty paused, then rubbed dried dye from her hair in a cascade of green dandruff. "How much did you pay those Spider gangsters to string up this place for you?"

"It was kind of a barter situation," Lyle told her.

"Think they'd do it again if I paid 'em real cash? Yeah? I thought so." She nodded thoughtfully. "They look like a heavy outfit, the City Spiders. I gotta pry 'em loose from that leftist gorgon before she finishes indoctrinating them in socialist revolution." Kitty wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "This is the Senator's own constituency! It was stupid of us to duck an ideological battle, just because this is a worthless area inhabited by reckless sociopaths who don't vote. Hell, that's exactly why it's important. This could be a vital territory in the culture war. I'm gonna call the office right away, start making arrangements. There's no way we're gonna leave this place in the hands of the self-styled Queen of Peace and Justice over there."

She snorted, then stretched a kink out of her back. "With a little self-control and discipline, I can save those Spiders from themselves and turn them into an asset to law and order! I'll get 'em to string up a couple of trailers here in the zone. We could start a dojo."

Eddy called, two weeks later. He was in a beachside cabana somewhere in Catalunya, wearing a silk floral-print shirt and a new and very pricey-looking set of spex. "How's life, Lyle?"

"It's okay, Eddy."

"Making out all right?" Eddy had two new tattoos on his cheekbone.

"Yeah. I got a new paying roommate. She's a martial artist."

"Girl roommate working out okay this time?"

"Yeah, she's good at pumping the flywheel and she lets me get on with my bike work. Bike business has been picking up a lot lately. Looks like I might get a legal electrical feed and some more floorspace, maybe even some genuine mail delivery. My new roomie's got a lot of useful contacts."

"Boy, the ladies sure love you, Lyle! Can't beat 'em off with a stick, can you, poor guy? That's a heck of a note."

Eddy leaned forward a little, shoving aside a silver tray full of dead gold-tipped zigarettes. "You been getting the packages?"

"Yeah. Pretty regular."

"Good deal," he said briskly, "but you can wipe 'em all now. I don't need those backups any more. Just wipe the data and trash the disks, or sell 'em. I'm into some, well, pretty hairy opportunities right now, and I don't need all that old clutter. It's kid stuff anyway."

"Okay, man. If that's the way you want it."

Eddy leaned forward. "D'you happen to get a package lately? Some hardware? Kind of a settop box?"

"Yeah, I got the thing."

"That's great, Lyle. I want you to open the box up, and break all the chips with pliers."

"Yeah?"

"Then throw all the pieces away. Separately. It's trouble, Lyle, okay? The kind of trouble I don't need right now."

"Consider it done, man."

"Thanks! Anyway, you won't be bothered by mailouts from now on." He paused. "Not that I don't appreciate your former effort and goodwill, and all."

Lyle blinked. "How's your love life, Eddy?"

Eddy sighed. "Frederika! What a handful! I dunno, Lyle, it was okay for a while, but we couldn't stick it together. I don't know why I ever thought that private cops were sexy. I musta been totally out of my mind.... Anyway, I got a new girlfriend now."

"Yeah?"

"She's a politician, Lyle. She's a radical member of the Spanish Parliament. Can you believe that? I'm sleeping with an elected official of a European local government." He laughed. "Politicians are *sexy*, Lyle. Politicians are *hot!* They have charisma. They're glamorous. They're powerful. They can really make things happen! Politicians get around. They know things on the inside track. I'm having more fun with Violeta than I knew there was in the world."

"That's pleasant to hear, zude."

"More pleasant than you know, my man."

"Not a problem," Lyle said indulgently. "We all gotta make our own lives, Eddy."

"Ain't it the truth."

Lyle nodded. "I'm in business, zude!"

"You gonna perfect that inertial whatsit?" Eddy said.

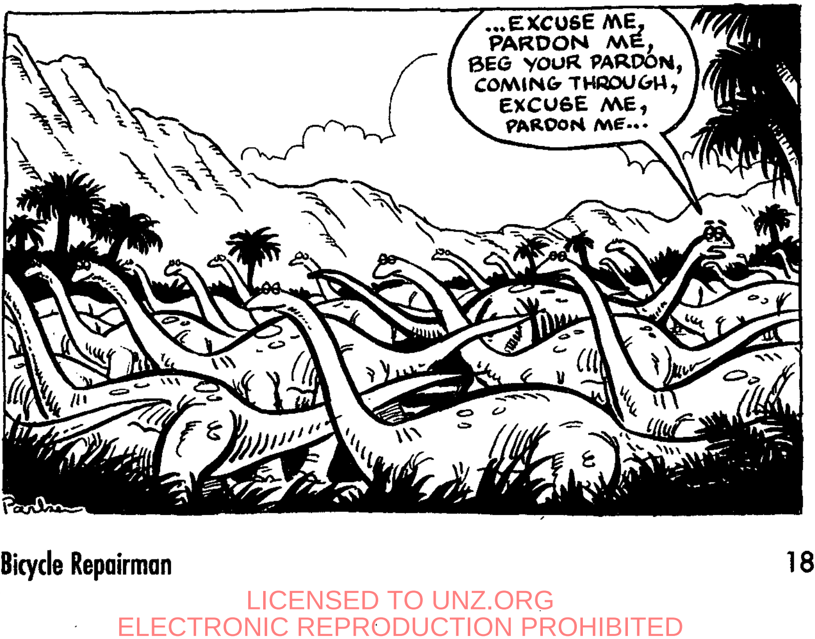
"Maybe. It could happen. I get to work on it a lot now. I'm getting closer, really getting a grip on the concept. It feels really good. It's a good hack, man. It makes up for all the rest of it. It really does."

Eddy sipped his mimosa. "Lyle."

"What?"

"You didn't hook up that settop box and look at it, did you?"

"You know me, Eddy," Lyle said. "Just another kid with a wrench." ●


...EXCUSE ME, PARDON ME, BEG YOUR PARDON, COMING THROUGH, EXCUSE ME, PARDON ME...
Parker

Kelly Link

FLYING LESSONS

Kelly Link was born in Miami, Florida; grew up in North Carolina; went to school in New York City; and now works in a bookstore in Boston. She spent a year in St. Andrews, Scotland, where her first story for *Asimov's* takes place. Ms. Link attended the 1995 Clarion Writers' Workshop in East Lansing, Michigan. Her work has been sold to *Century* and *Realms of Fantasy.*

Illustration by Laurie Harden

1. Going to hell. Instructions and advice.

Listen, because I'm only going to do this once. You'll have to get there by way of London. Take the overnight train from Waverly. Sit in the last car. Speak to no one. Don't fall asleep.

When you arrive at Kings Cross, go down into the Underground. Get on the Northern line. Sit in the last car. Speak to no one. Don't fall asleep.

The Northern line stops at Angel, at London Bridge, at Elephant and Castle, Tooting Broadway. The last marked station is Morden: stay in your seat. Other passengers will remain with you in the car. Speak to no one.

These are some of the unlisted stations you will pass: Howling Green. Duke's Pit. Sparrowkill. Stay in your seat; don't fall asleep. If you look around the car, you may notice that the other passengers have started to glow. The bulbs on the car dim as the passengers give off more and more light. If you look down you may find that you yourself are casting light into the dark car.

The final stop is Bonehouse.

2. June in Edinburgh in June.

June stole £7 from Rooms 2 and 3, enough for trainfare and a birthday present for Lily. Room 3 was American again, and Americans never knew how much currency they had in the first place. They left pound coins lying upon the dresser, like scraps of sunlight.

She ticked off the morning jobs on her right hand. The washroom at the end of the hall was clean. Beds were made up, and all the ashtrays were cleared out. Rooms 1 through 4 were done, and Room 5 at the top of the house was honeymooners from Dallas. They hadn't been at breakfast for three days, living on love, she supposed. Why travel from Dallas to Edinburgh merely to have sex? She pictured a great host of Texans, rising on white wings and fanning out across the Atlantic, buoyed up by love. Falling into bed at journey's end, exhausted by such travel. Nonsense.

She emptied the wastebasket in Room 3, and went thumping down the stairs with the cleaning box in one hand, and the room keys swinging in the other. "Here, Ma," she said, handing the keys and the box over to Lily.

"Ta," Lily said sourly. "Finished up, have you?" Her face was flushed, and her black hair snaked down the back of her neck. Walter was in the kitchen, his elbows plunged into soapy water, singing along with Radio 1 as he worked, an opera program.

"Where are you off to?" Lily said, raising her voice.

June ducked past her. "Dunno exactly," she said. "I'll be back in time for tea tomorrow. Goodbye, Walter!" she shouted. "Bake Lily a lovely cake."

3. *Arrows of Beauty.*

June went to St. Andrews; she thought it would be pleasant to spend a day by the sea. The train was full, and she sat next to a fat, freckled woman eating sandwiches, one after the other like bonbons. June watched her mouth open and close rhythmically, measuring out the swish and click of the train on the tracks like a metronome.

When the sandwiches were gone, the woman took out a hardcover book. There was a man and a woman on the cover, embracing, his face turned into her shoulder, her hair falling across her face. As if they were ashamed to be caught like this, half-naked before the eyes of strangers. Lily liked that sort of thing.

The name of the author was Rose Read. It sounded like a conjuring name, an ingredient in a love spell, a made-up, let's pretend name. Leaning over the woman's speckled-egg arm, June looked at the photo on the back. Mile-long curlicued eyelashes, and a plump, secretive smile. Probably the author's real name was Agnes Frumple; those eyelashes couldn't be real, either.

The woman noticed June's interest. "It's called *Arrows of Beauty*. Quite good," she said. "All about Helen of Troy, and it's very well researched."

"Really," June said. She spent the next half an hour looking across the aisle, out of the opposite window. There were several Americans on the train, dressed in tourist plaids, their voices flat and bright and empty as parrots. June wondered if her honeymooners would come to this someday, traveling not out of love but boredom, shifting restlessly like children in their narrow seats. *Are we there yet? Where are we?*

Shortly before the train pulled into Leuchars station, the woman fell asleep. *Arrows of Beauty* dropped from her slack fingers, and slid down the incline of her lap. June caught it before it hit the floor. June got onto the station platform, the book tucked under her arm.

4. Fine Scents.

The wind tipped and rattled at the tin sides of the St. Andrews bus. It whipped at June's hair, until she scraped the loose tendrils back to her scalp with a barrette. She stared at a sign beside the door, which read "Passengers entering or leaving the bus whilst in motion do so at their own risk."

The golf course came into view, the clipped lawns like squares of green velvet. Behind the golf course was the North Sea, and somewhere over the sea, June supposed, was Norway or Finland. She'd never even been to England. It might be nice to travel: she pictured her mother waving goodbye with a white handkerchief, *so long, kid! Just like her father, you know*. Goodbye, good riddance.

St. Andrews was three streets wide, marching down to the curved belly of the harbor. A seawall ran along the cliffs at the edge of the town, from the broken-backed Cathedral, to the Castle, hollowed out like an old tooth and green in the middle. Castle and Cathedral leaned toward each other, pinching the sea between them.

June got off the bus on Market Street. She bought a box of Black Magic chocolates in the Woolworth's and then went down an alley cobbled with old stones from the Cathedral, worn down to glassy smoothness. Iron railings ran along storefronts, the rails snapped off near the base, and she remembered a school chaperone saying the iron had been taken for the war effort. Taken to be made into cannons and shrapnel and belt buckles, just as the town had harvested stone from the Cathedral. Ancient history, scrapped and put to economical uses.

An old-fashioned sign swinging above an open shop door caught her eye. It read "Fine Scents. I.M. Kew, Prop." Through the window she could see a man behind the counter, smiling anxiously at a well-dressed woman. She was saying something to him that June couldn't make out, but it was her velvety-rough voice that pulled June into the store.

". . . don't know if the rest of the aunties can keep her off him. It's her hobby, you know, pulling wings off flies. You know how fond of him Minnie and I are, but Di and Prune are absolutely no help, she'll do the poor boy just like his mother. . . ."

The marvelous voice trailed off, and the woman lifted a stopper out of a bottle. "Really, darling, I don't like it. Sweet and wet as two virgins kissing. It's not up to your usual standards."

The man shrugged, still smiling. His fingers drummed on the counter. "I thought you might like a change, that's all," he said. "So my Rose-By-Any-Other-Name, I'll make you up a standard batch. May I help you, dearie?"

"I was just looking," June said.

"We don't have anything here for your sort," he said, not unkindly. "All custom scents, see."

"Oh." She looked at the woman, who was examining her makeup, her long smudgy eyelashes in a compact. Rhinestones on the compact lid spelled out RR, and June remembered where she had seen the woman's face. "Excuse me, but aren't you a writer?"

The compact snapped shut in the white hand. A wing of yellow, helmeted hair swung forward as the woman turned to June. "Yes," she said, her pink pointed tongue slipping between the small teeth like pearls. "Are you the sort that buys my books?"

No, June thought. I'm the sort that lifts them. She delved into her sack. "This is for my mother," she said. "Would you sign it for her?"

"How lovely," Rose Read said. She signed the book with a fountain pen proffered by the small man behind the counter, in the careful, looped penmanship of a fifth former. "There. Have you got a lover, my dear?"

"That's none of your business," June said, grabbing the book back.

"Is it my business, Mr. Kew?" Rose Read said to the shopkeeper. He snickered. She had said his name the way two spies meeting at a party might use made-up names.

"She doesn't have a lover," he said. "I'd smell him on her, if she did."

June took a step back, then another, hesitating. The man and woman stared at her, blandly. She found the store and the pair of them unnerving, and she was caught perversely between a wish to flee the store, and an itch to steal something. At that moment, a large and buoyant family poured into the shop. They pressed up to the counter, shaking a battered copy of *Fodors* at Mr. Kew, all speaking at once. In the confusion June pocketed the unwanted perfume and quickly left the store.

5. Going to hell. Instructions and advice.

It is late morning when you arrive at Bonehouse, but the sky is dark. As you walk, you must push aside the air, like heavy cloth. Your foot stumbles on the mute ground.

You are in a flat place where the sky presses down, and the buildings creep close along the streets, and all the doors stand open. Grass grows on the roofs of the houses; the roofs are packed sod, and the grass raises up tall like hair on a scalp. Follow the others. They are dead, and know the way better than you. Speak to no one.

At last you will arrive at a door in an alley, with a dog asleep on the threshold. He has many heads and each head has many teeth, and his teeth are sharp and eager as knives.

6. What was in the bottle.

June sat happy and quiet in the grassy bowl of the castle. Students in their red gowns and tourists clambered over the worn and tumbled steps that went over the drawbridge, between the squat towers. Outside the castle wall, there were more steps, winding down to the rocky beach. She could hear people complaining loudly as they came back up, the wind pushing them backward. Inside the wall the air was still, the sky arched like a glass lid, shot through with light.

Ravens sleek and round as kettles patrolled the grass. They lifted in lazy circles when the tourists came too close, settling down near June, hissing and croaking like toads. She took the perfume out of her knapsack and turned it in her hands. The bottle was tall and slim and plainly made. The stopper was carved out of a rosy stone, and where it plunged into the mouth of the decanter the glass was faceted like the rhinestones on Rose Read's compact. June took out the stopper.

She touched it to her wrist, then held her wrist up to her nose and sniffed. It smelled sweet and greeny-ripe as an apple. It made her head spin. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again there was someone watching her.

Up in the tilted crown of the left-hand tower, Mr. Kew, Prop. was looking straight down at her. He smiled and winked one eye shut. He cocked his index finger, sighted, and squeezed his fist closed. *Pow,* he said silently, pulling his lips tight in exaggeration around the word. Then he turned to make his way down.

June jumped up. If she went out over the drawbridge they would meet at the foot of the stairs. She grabbed up her pack and went in the opposite direction. She stopped at the wall and looked over. A cement bulwark, about five feet below, girdled up the cliffs that the castle sat on; she tossed the pack over and followed it, heels first, holding hard to the crumbling wall.

7. She hears a story about birds.

The beach was down to June's right, invisible past the curve of the castle's bulk, cliffs and marshy land to her left. Waves slapped against the concrete sides several feet below her. She sat on the ledge, wondering how long she would have to wait before climbing back up to the castle, or down to the beach. The wind cut straight through her jersey.

She turned her head, and saw there was a man standing next to her. Her heart slammed into her chest, before she saw that it was a boy her own age, seventeen or eighteen, with a white face and blue eyes. His eyebrows met, knitted together above the bridge of his nose.

"Before you climbed down," he said, "did you happen to notice if there were a lot of birds up there?"

"You mean girls?" June said, sneering at him.

"No, birds. You know, with wings." He flapped his arms.

"Ravens," June said. "And maybe some smaller ones, like sparrows."

He sat down beside her, folding his arms around his knees. "Damn," he said. "I thought maybe if I waited for a while, they might get bored and leave. They have a very short attention span, you know."

"You're hiding from birds?"

"I have a phobia," he said defensively. "Like claustrophobia, you know."

"That's unfortunate," June said. "I mean, there are birds everywhere."

"It's not all birds," he said. "Or it's not all the time. Sometimes they bother me, sometimes they don't. They look at me funny."

"I'm afraid of spiders," June said. "Once when I was little I put my foot into a shoe and there was a spider inside. I still shake my shoes before I put them on."

"When I was five, my mother was killed by a flock of peacocks." He said this in the manner of someone remarking that it had rained this morning.

"What?" June said.

He looked at her earnestly. "My mother took me to see the castle at Inverness. She said that my father was a king who lived in a castle. She was always making stories up like that. I don't remember the castle very well, but afterward we went for a walk in the garden. There was a flock of peacocks, and they began to stalk us. They were so big—as tall as I was. My mother stuck me in an orange tree and told me to yell for help as loudly as I could."

He took a deep breath. "The peacocks' feathers sounded like silk dresses brushing against the ground. I was afraid to make a noise. If I did, they might notice me. They crowded my mother up against the curb of a stone fountain, she was pushing at them with her hands and then she fell backward. The fountain only had two inches of water in it. I heard her head crack against the bottom when she fell. It knocked her unconscious and she drowned before anyone came."

His face was serious and beseeching; she could see the small flutter of pulse against the white flesh—thin as paper—of his jaw.

June shuddered. "That's horrible," she said. "Who took care of you?"

"My mother and father weren't married," he said. "He already had a wife. My mother didn't have any family, so my father gave me to his sisters. Aunt Minnie, Aunt Prune, Aunt Di, and Aunt Rose."

"My father emigrated to Australia when I was two," June said. "I don't remember him much. My mother remarried about a year ago."

"I've never seen my father," the boy said. "Aunt Rose says it would be too dangerous. His wife, Vera, hates me even though she's never seen me, because I'm her husband's bastard. She's kind of insane."

"What's your name?"

"Humphrey Bogart Stoneking," he said. "My mother was a big fan. What's your name?"

"June," said June.

They were silent for a moment. June rubbed her hands together for comfort. "Are you cold?" asked Humphrey. She nodded, and he moved closer and put his arm around her.

"You smell nice," he said after a moment. He sniffed thoughtfully. "Familiar, sort of."

"Yeah?" She turned her head and their mouths bumped together, soft and cold.

8. Rose Read on young lovers.

It's all the fault of that damned perfume, and that mooning, meddling, milky-faced perfumer. He could have had it back and no harm done, if he didn't love mischief more than his mother. So it might have been my idea—it might have been an accident. Or maybe it was Fate. If I'm still around, so is that tired old hag. Do you think that I have the time to see to every love affair in the world personally?

Those hesitating kisses, the tender fumbles and stumbles and awkward meetings of body parts give me indigestion. Heartburn. Give me two knowledgeable parties who know what is up, and what fits where; give me Helen of Troy, fornicating her way across the ancient world, Achilles and Patroclos amusing themselves in a sweaty tent.

A swan, a bull, a shower of gold, something new, something old, something borrowed, something blue. He seduced Sarah Stoneking in an empty movie house, stepped right off of the screen during the matinee and lisped "Shweetheart" at her. She fell into the old goat's arms. I know, I was there.

9. In which a discovery is made.

The sky stayed clear and pale all night long. When they were cold again, they wrapped themselves in Humphrey's coat, and leaned back against the wall. June took out the box of chocolates and ate them as Humphrey explored her pack. He pulled out the perfume. "Where'd you get this?"

"I nicked it from a shop off Market Street."

"I should have known." He pulled out the book. "Aunt Rose," he said.

"She's your aunt?" June said. She looked at him defiantly. "I guess I should give it to you to give back."

He shook his head. "If she didn't mean for you to have it, you wouldn't even have thought of taking it. Might as well keep it now. She probably set this whole thing up."

"How?" June said. "Is she a psychic or something?"

"This must be how they're planning to stop me," Humphrey said. "They think if I have a girlfriend, I'll give up on the flying lessons, take up fucking as a new hobby."

"Right." June said, stiffly. "It was nice to meet you too. I don't usually go around doing this."

"Wait," he said, catching at her pack as she stood up. "I didn't mean it that way. You're right. This is a complete coincidence. And I didn't think that you did."

He smiled up at her. June sat back down, mollified, stretching her legs out in front of her. "Why are you taking flying lessons?"

"I've been saving up for it," he said. "I went to see a psychologist about a year ago, and he suggested that flying lessons might make me less afraid of birds. Besides, I've always wanted to. I used to dream about it. The aunts say it's a bad idea, but they're just superstitious. I have my first lesson tomorrow. Today, actually."

"I think flying would be wonderful," June said. "But I know something just as nice."

"What?" he said. So she showed him. His mouth tasted bittersweet.

10. Going to hell. Instructions and advice.

As the others step over the dog he doesn't wake. If you step over him, his nostrils will scent live flesh and he will tear you to pieces.

Take this perfume with you and when you come to Bonehouse, dab it behind your ears, at your wrists and elbows, at the back of your knees. Stroke it into the vee of your sex, as you would for a lover. The scent is heavy and rich, like the first cold handful of dirt tossed into the dug grave. It will trick the dog's nose.

Inside the door, there is no light but the foxfire glow of your own body. The dead flicker like candles around you. They are burning their memories for warmth. They may brush up against you, drawn to what is stronger and hotter and brighter in you. Don't speak to them.

There are no walls, no roof above you except darkness. There are no doors, only the luminous windows that the dead have become. Unravel the left arm of his sweater and let it fall to the ground.

11. In the All-Night Bakery at dawn.

June and Humphrey went around the corner of the bulwark, down over an outcropping of rocks, slick with gray light, down to the beach. A seagull, perched like a lantern upon the castle wall, watched them go.

They walked down Market Street, the heavy, wet air clinging like ghosts to their hair and skin. The sound of their feet, hollow and sharp, rang like bells on the cobblestones. They came to the All-Night Bakery and June could hear someone singing inside.

Behind the counter there were long rows of white ovens and cooling racks, as tall as June. A woman stood with her strong back to them, sliding trays stacked with half-moon loaves into an oven, like a mother tucking her children into warm sheets.

She was singing to herself, low and deep, and as June watched and listened, the colorless loaves, the ovens, the woman and her lullaby cast out a fierce radiance. They grew brighter and larger and crowded the bakery and June's senses so that she began to doubt there was room for herself, for the houses and street, the dawn outside to exist unharmed. The woman shut the oven door, and June was afraid that presently she would turn around and show June her face, flickering pale and enormous as the moon.

She stumbled back outside, dizzy with light and heat. Humphrey followed her in a few minutes, his pockets stuffed with doughnuts and meat pies.

"My Aunt Di," he said. He handed June a pastry. "Some nights I work here with her."

He went with her to the station, and wrapped up two greasy bacon pies and gave them to her. Before the bus came she wrote her address and telephone on a corner of the napkin, and then reached impulsively into her pocket. She took out the crumpled banknotes, the small, heavy coins. "Here," she said. "For your flying lesson."

She dumped them into his cupped hands, and then before she could decide if the blush on his face was one of pleasure, or embarrassment, the train was there. She got on and didn't look back.

At the bed and breakfast, Lily and Walter were finishing the breakfast washup. June handed the book and the perfume to her mother. "Happy birthday, Lily."

"Where were you last night?" Lily said. She held the perfume bottle between her thumb and middle finger as if it were a dead rat.

"With a friend," June said vaguely, and pretended not to see Lily's frown. She went up the stairs to the top of the house, to her room in the attic. The honeymooners' door was shut, but she could hear them as she went past in the hall. It sounded just like pigeons, soft little noises and gasps. She slammed her door shut and went straight to sleep.

When she came down again, hands and face washed, hair combed back neat, the cake that Walter had made, square and plain, with a dozen pink candles spelling out Lily's name, was on the table. Lily was looking at it as if it might explode. June said, "How do you like the perfume?"

"I don't," Lily said. She clattered the knives and forks down. "It smells cheap and too sweet. Not subtle at all."

Walter came up behind Lily and squeezed her around the middle. She pushed at him, but not hard. "I quite liked it," he said. "Your mother's been sitting with her feet up in the parlor all day, reading the rubbishy romance you got her. Very subtle, that."

"Get away with you," Lily said. She blew out the candles with one efficient breath, a tiny smile on her face.

12. Room five.

Two days later the honeymooners left. When June went into the room, the copper tang of sex was so strong that she could hardly breathe. She flung open the windows and stripped the ravaged bed, but the smell, satiated and unrepentant, lingered in the walls and in the carpet.

In the afternoon, a woman dressed in somber, expensive black came looking for a room. "It would be for some time," the woman said. She spoke very carefully, as if she were used to being misunderstood. June, sitting in the parlor, idly leafing through sex advice columns in American magazines left behind by the honeymooners, looked up for a second. She thought the woman in black had an antique look about her, precise and hard, like a face on a cameo.

"We do have a room," said Lily. "But I don't know that you'll want it. We try to be nice here, but you look like you might be accustomed to better."

The woman sighed. "I am getting a divorce from my husband," she said. "He has been unfaithful. I don't want him to find me, so I will stay here where he would not think to look. You were recommended to me."

"Really?" said Lily, looking pleased. "By who?"

But the woman couldn't remember. She signed her name, Mrs. Vera Ambrosia, in a thick slant of ink, and produced £40, and another £40 as a deposit. When June showed her up to Room 5, her nostrils flared like a horse scenting fire. But she said nothing. She had with her only one small suitcase, and a covered box. Out of the box she took a bird cage on a collapsible stand. There was nothing in the bird cage but dust.

When June left, she was standing at the window looking out into grayness.

13. A game of golf.

June tried not to think about Humphrey. It was a silly name anyway. She went out with her friends and she never mentioned his name. They would have laughed at his name. It was probably made up.

She thought of describing how his eyebrows met, in a straight bar across his face. She decided that it should repulse her. It did. And he was a liar too. Not even a good liar.

All the same, she rented old movies, *Key Largo* and *Casablanca*, and watched them with Walter and Lily. And sometimes she wondered if he had been telling the truth. Her period came, and so she didn't have to worry about that; she worried anyway, and she began to notice the way that birds watched from telephone lines as she walked past them. She counted them, trying to remember how they added up for joy, how for sorrow.

She asked Walter, who said, "Sweetheart, for you they mean joy.

You're a good girl and you deserve to be happy." He was touching up the red trim around the front door. June sat hunched on the step beside him, swirling the paint around in the canister.

"Didn't my mother deserve to be happy?" she said sharply.

"Well, she's got me, hasn't she?" Walter said, his eyebrows shooting up. He pretended to be wounded. "Oh, I see. Sweetheart, you've got to be patient. Plenty of time to fall in love when you're a bit older."

"She was my age when she had me!" June said. "And where were you then? And where is *he* now?" She got up awkwardly and ran inside, past a pair of startled guests, past Lily who stood in the narrow hall and watched her pass, no expression at all on her mother's face.

That night June had a dream. She stood in her nightgown, an old one that had belonged to her mother, her bare feet resting on cold silky grass. The wind went through the holes in the flannel, curled around her body and fluttered the hem of the nightgown. She tasted salt in her mouth, and saw the white moth-eaten glow of the waves below her, stitching water to the shore. The moon was sharp and thin, as if someone had eaten the juicy bit and left the rind.

"Fore!" someone called. She realized she was standing barefoot and nearly naked on the St. Andrews golf course. "Why hello, little thief," someone said.

June pinched herself, and it hurt just a little, and she didn't wake up. Rose Read still stood in front of her, dressed all in white: white cashmere sweater; white wool trousers; spotless white leather shoes and gloves. "You look positively frost-bitten, darling child," Rose Read said.

She leaned toward June and pressed her soft, warm mouth against June's mouth. June opened her mouth to protest, and Rose Read breathed down her throat. It was delicious, like drinking fire. She felt Rose Read's kiss rushing out toward her ten fingers, her icy feet, pooling somewhere down below her stomach. She felt like a June-shaped bowl brimming over with warmth and radiance.

Rose Read removed her mouth. "There," she said.

"I want to kiss her too," said a querulous voice. "It's my turn, Rosy."

There were two other women standing on the green. The one who had spoken was tall and gaunt and brittle as sticks, her dark, staring eyes fixing June like two straight pins.

"June, you remember Di, don't you, Humphrey's other aunt?" Rose said.

"She was different," June said, remembering the giantess in the bakery, whose voice had reflected off the walls like light.

"Want a kiss," Humphrey's aunt Di said again.

"Don't mind her," Rose Read said. "It's that time of the month. Humphrey's minding the bakery: it helps her to be outside. Let her kiss your cheek, she won't hurt you."

June closed her eyes, lightly brushed her cheek against the old woman's lips. It was like being kissed by a faint and hungry ghost. Humphrey's aunt stepped back sighing.

"That's a good girl," Rose said. "And this is another aunt, Minnie. You don't have to kiss her, she's not much for the things of the flesh, is Minnie."

"Hello, June," the woman said, inclining her head. She looked like the headmistress of June's comprehensive—so old that Lily had once been her student. When her O-levels scores had come back two years ago, the headmistress had called June into her office.

It's a pity, the woman had said, *because you seem to have a brain in your head. But if you are determined to make yourself into nothing at all, then I can't stop you. Your mother was the same sort, smart enough but willful—oh yes, I remember her quite well. It was a pity. It's always a pity.*

"I'm dreaming," June said.

"It would be a mistake to believe that," said Rose Read. "An utter failure of the imagination. In any case, while you're here, you might as well solve a little argument for us. As you can see, here are two golf balls, sitting nice and pretty on the green at your feet. And here is the third"—she pointed at the cup—"only we can't agree which of us it was that put it there."

The moon went behind a wisp of cloud, but the two golf balls shone like two white stones. Light spilled out of the cup and beaded on the short blades of grayish grass. "How do I know whose ball that is?" June said. "I didn't see anything, I wasn't here until now—I mean—"

Rose Read cut her off. "It doesn't really matter whose ball it is, little thief, just whose ball you *say* it is."

"But I don't know!" June protested.

"You people are always so greedy," Rose Read said. "Very well: say it belongs to Minnie, she can pull a few strings, get you into the university of your choice; Di, well, you saw how much she likes you. Tell me what you want, June."

June took a deep breath. Suddenly she was afraid that she would wake up before she had a chance to answer. "I want Humphrey," she said.

"My game, ladies," Rose Read said, and the moon came out again.

June woke up. The moon was bright and small in the dormer window above her, and she could hear the pigeons' feet chiming against the leaded glass.

14. The view from the window.

Before Humphrey came to see June, the woman in Room 5 had paid for her third week in advance, and June found the perfume she had given her mother in the rubbish bin. She took it up to her room, put a dab on her wrist.

He was sitting on the front steps when she swept the dust out of the door. "I lost your address," he said.

"Oh?" she said coolly, folding her arms the way Lily did.

"I did," he said. "But I found it again yesterday."

His eyebrows didn't repulse her as much as she had hoped they would. His sweater was blue, like his eyes. "You're lying," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I didn't come to see you because I thought maybe Aunt Rose tricked you into liking me. I thought maybe you wouldn't like me anymore. Do you?"

She looked at him. "Maybe," she said. "How was your flying lesson?"

"I've been up in the plane twice. It's a Piper Cub, just one engine and you can feel the whole sky rushing around you when you're up there. The last time we went up, Tiny—he's the instructor—let me take the controls. It was like nothing I've ever done before—that is," he said warily, "it was quite nice. You look lovely, June. Have you missed me too?"

"I suppose," she said.

"Aunt Di gave me the night off. Will you come for a walk with me?" he said.

They came home again when the sky above the streetlights was plush and yellow as the fur of a tiger. "Would you like to come in?" she asked him.

"Yes, please." But they didn't go inside yet. They stood on the steps, smiling at each other and holding hands. June heard a sound, a fluttering and cooing. She looked up and saw a flock of pigeons, crowding on the window ledge two stories above them. Two hands, white and pressed flat with the weight of many rings, lay nestled like doves among the pigeons. Humphrey cried out, crouching and raising his own hands to cover his head.

June pulled him into the cover of the door. She fumbled the key into the lock, and they stumbled inside. "It was just the woman in Room 5," she said. "She's a little strange about birds. She puts crumbs on the sill for them. She says they're her babies." She rubbed Humphrey's back. The sweater felt good beneath her hands, furry and warm as a live animal.

"I'm okay now," he said. "I think the lessons are helping." He laughed, shuddering in a great breath. "I think you're helping."

They kissed, and then she took him up the stairs to her room. As they passed the door of Room 5, they could hear the woman crooning and the pigeons answering back.

15. Rose Read on motherhood.

I never had a mother. I remember being born, the salt of that old god's dying upon my lips, the water bearing me up as I took my first steps.

Minnie never had a mother either. Lacking example, we did the best we could with Humphrey. I like to think he grew up a credit to us both.

Prune runs Bonne Hause half the year, and we used to send Humphrey to her in the autumn. It wasn't the best place for a lively boy. He tried to be good, but he always ended up shattering the nerves of Prune's wispy convalescents, driving her alcoholics back to the drink, stealing the sweets her spa patients hoard. Raising the dead, in fact, and driving poor, anemic Prune into pale hysterics.

Di's never had much use for men, but she's fond of him in her own way.

We read to him a lot. Di's bakery came out of his favorite book, the one he read to pieces when he was little. All about the boy in the night kitchen, and the airplane . . . it was to be expected that he'd want to learn to fly. They always do. We moved around to keep him safe and far away from Vera, but you can't keep him away from the sky. If he comes to a bad end, then we kept his feet safely planted on the ground as long as we could.

We tried to teach him to take precautions. Minnie knitted him a beautiful blue sweater and he needn't be afraid of birds nor goddess while he keeps that on. We did the best we could.

16. The Skater.

In the morning, Humphrey helped June with her chores. Lily said nothing when she met him, only nodded and gave him a mop.

Walter said, "So you're the boy she's been pining after," and laughed when June made a face. They tidied the first four rooms on the second floor, and when June came out of the washroom with the wastebasket, she saw Humphrey standing in front of Room 5, his hand on the doorknob. Light from the window at the end of the hall fell sharply on the downy nape of his neck, his head bent toward the door.

"Stop," June hissed. He turned to her, his face white and strained. "She doesn't like us to come into her room, she does everything herself."

"I thought I could hear someone in there," Humphrey said, "saying to come in."

June shook her head violently. "She's gone. She goes to Charlotte's Square every day, and sits and feeds the pigeons."

She grabbed his hand. "Come on, let's go somewhere."

They went to the National Gallery on the Royal Mile. Outside it was gray and dreary, the people brushing past no more real than bits of blown paper. Inside was like walking around in a castle, the ceilings as tall above them as three Junes. Only all the kings and queens were on the walls, frowning down from their carved golden frames at Humphrey and June, like people peering through windows. Their varied expressions were ferocious and joyful and serene by turns, so full of color and light that they made June feel as if she were a mere dismal ghost walking through rooms thronged with the living.

Humphrey tugged at her hand, and the warmth of his flesh surprised her. They sat on a bench in front of Raeburn's painting *The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddiston Loch*. "This is my favorite painting," he said.

June looked at the Reverend Walker, all in black like a crow, floating above the gray ice, his cheeks rosy with the cold. "I know why you like it," she said. "He looks like he's flying."

"He looks like he's happy," Humphrey said. "Do you remember your father?"

"No," June said. "I suppose when I look in the mirror. How about you?"

"No," Humphrey said. He shrugged. "I used to make up stories about him, though. Because of my name—I thought he was American, maybe even a gangster. I used to pretend that he was part of the Mafia, like Capone. Aunt Minnie says I'm not too far off."

"I know," June said. "Let's pick out fathers here—can I have the Reverend Robert Walker? He looks like Walter. Who do you want?"

They walked through the gallery, June making suggestions, Humphrey vetoing prospective parents. "No, no, no," he protested. "I do not want Sir Walter Scott," he said as June paused in front of a portrait. "An aunt who writes historical romances is enough. Besides, we look nothing alike."

June peered into the next room. "Well," she said. "You'll have to go fatherless then. All this gallery is old gloomy stuff—there's not one decent dad in the lot of them."

She turned around. Humphrey stood in front of an enormous painting of a woman and a swan. The swan arched, his wings spread over the supine woman, as large as the boy who stood in front of him.

"Oh," she said tentatively. "Do birds bother you in paintings too?"

He said "No," his eyes still fixed on the painting. "It's all rubbish, anyway. Let's go."

17. Bonne Hause.

The summer wore on and the nights were longer and darker. Humphrey came on the train from Leuchars every weekend, and at the beginning of August, they climbed to the top of Arthur's Mount for a picnic supper. Edinburgh was crouched far below them, silvered and haphazard as the heaped bones of a fallen giant, the green cloak of grass his bed, the castle his crown.

Ravens stalked the hill, pecking at the grass, but Humphrey ignored them. "Next weekend Tiny says I can make my solo flight," he said. "If the weather's good."

"I wish I could see you," June said, "but Lily will kill me if I'm not here to help. Things always get crazy this time of year." The Fringe Festival was starting up, and already the bed and breakfast was full. Lily had even put a couple from Strassburg into June's attic room. June was sleeping on a cot in the kitchen.

"S'all right," Humphrey said. "I'd probably be even more nervous with you there. I'll come on the eight o'clock train and meet you in Waverly Station. We'll celebrate. Go out and see the performers." June shivered. "Are you cold? Take my sweater. I've got something else for you too." He pulled a flat oblong package from his pack and gave it to her along with the sweater.

"It's a book," June said. "Is it something by your aunt?" She tore off the paper, the wind snatching it from her hands. It was a children's book, with a picture on the cover of a man with flaming hair, a golden sun behind him. *"D'Aulaire's Greek Mythology?"*

He didn't look at her. "Read it and tell me what you think."

June flipped through it. "Well at least it's got pictures," she said. It was getting too dark to look at the book properly. The city, the whole world beneath them was purpley dark; the hill they sat on seemed to be floating on a black sea. The ravens were moveable blots of inky stain, and the wind lifted and beat with murmurous breath at blades of grass and pinion feathers. She pulled the blue sweater tight around her shoulders.

"What will we do at the end of the summer?" Humphrey asked. He picked up one of her hands, and looked into it, as if he might see the future in the cup of her palm. "Normally I go to Aunt Prune's for a few months. She runs a clinic outside of London called Bonne Hause. For alcoholics and depressed rich people. I help the groundskeepers."

"Oh," June said.

"I don't want to go," Humphrey said. "That's the thing. I want to be with you, maybe go to Greece. My father lives there, sometimes. I want to see him, just once. Would you go with me?"

"Is that why you gave me this?" she said, frowning and holding up the book of mythology. "It's not exactly a guide book."

"More like family history," he said. The ravens muttered and cackled. "Have you ever dreamed you could fly, I mean with wings?"

"I've never even been in a plane," June said.

He told her something wonderful.

18. Why I write.

You may very well ask what the goddess of love is doing in St. Andrews, writing trashy romances. Adapting. Some of us have managed better than others, of course. Prune with her clinic and her patented

Pomegranate Weight Loss System, good for the health and the spirits. Di has her bakery. Minnie is more or less a recluse—she makes up crossword puzzles and designs knitting patterns, and feuds with prominent Classics scholars via the mail. No one has seen Paul in ages. He can't stand modern music, he says. He's living somewhere in the Soho district of London with a nice deaf man.

Zeus and that malevolent birdbrained bitch are still married, can you believe it? As if the world would stop spinning if she admitted that the whole thing was a mistake. It infuriates her to see anyone else having fun, especially her husband. We've never gotten on well—she fights with everyone sooner or later, which is why most of us are exiled to this corner of the world. I miss the sun, but never the company.

19. An unkindness of ravens.

June waited at Waverly Station for three and a half hours. The Fringe was in full swing, and performers in beads and feather masks dashed past her, chasing a windblown kite shaped like a wing. They smelled of dust and sweat and beer. They looked at her oddly, she thought, as they ran by. The kite blew toward her again, low on the ground, and she stuck out her foot. It lifted over her in a sudden gust of wind.

She rested her head in her hands. Someone nearby laughed, insinuating and hoarse, and she looked up to see one of the kite-chasers standing next to her. He was winding string in his hand, bringing the kite down. Bright eyes gleamed at her like jet buttons, above a yellow papier-mâché beak. "What's the matter, little thief?" the peacock said. "Lose something?"

Another man, in crow-black mourning, sat down on the bench beside her. He said nothing, and his pupils were not round, but elongated and flat like those of an owl. June jumped up and ran. She dodged raucous strangers with glittering eyes, whose clothing had the feel of soft spiky down, whose feet were scaly and knobbed and struck sparks from the pavement. They put out arms to stop her, and their arms were wings, their fingers feathers. She swung wildly at them, and ran on. On Queen Street, she lost them in a crowd, but she kept on running anyway.

Lily was sitting in the parlor when she got home. "Humphrey's Aunt Rose called," she said without preamble. "There's been an accident."

"What?" said June, breathing hard. Her chest heaved up and down. She thought she felt the tickle of feathers in her lungs; she thought she might throw up.

"His plane crashed. A flock of birds flew into the propeller. He died almost instantly."

"He's not dead," June said.

Lily didn't say anything. Her arms were folded against her body as if she were afraid they might extend, unwanted, toward her daughter. "He was a nice boy," she said finally.

"I *need to go up to my room*," June said. Of course he wasn't dead: she'd read the book. He'd explained the whole thing to her. When you're immortal, you don't die. *Half*-immortal, she corrected herself. So maybe *half*-dead, she could live with that.

Lily said, "The woman in Room 5 left this afternoon. I haven't cleaned it yet, but I thought we might move the guests in your room. I'll help you."

"No!" June said. "I'll do it." She hesitated. "Thanks, Lily."

"I'll make up a pot of tea, then," Lily said, and went into the kitchen. June took the ring of keys from the wall and went up to her room. She took the blue sweater out of the cupboard and put it on. She picked up the bottle of perfume, and then she paused. She bent and thumbed open the suitcase of the Strassburg honeymooners, reaching down through the folded clothes until her hand closed around a wad of notes. She took them all, without counting.

The last two things she took were the two books: *D'Aulaire's Greek Myths*, and *Arrows of Beauty*.

She went out of her room without locking it, down the stairs to Room 5. The light didn't come on when she lowered the switch, and things brushed against her, soft and damp. She ran to the drapes and flung them back.

The window swung open, and suddenly the room was full of whiteness. At first, blinking hard, she thought that it was snowing inside. Then she saw that the snowflakes were goosedown. Both pillows had been torn open and the duvet was rent down the middle. Feathers dusted the floor, sliding across June's palm and her cheek. She choked on a feather, spat it out.

As she moved across the room, the feathers clung to her. She felt them attaching themselves to her back, growing into two great wings. "Stop it!" she cried.

She opened the *D'Aulaire*, flipping past Hera's mad, triumphant face, to a picture of rosy-cheeked Venus. She pulled the stopper from the perfume bottle and tipped it over on the drawing. She poured out half the bottle on the book, and behind her someone sneezed. She turned around.

It was Humphrey's aunt, Rose Read. She looked almost dowdy—travel-stained and worn as if she had come a great distance to reach June. She didn't look anything like the woman in the mythology book. June said, "Where is he?"

Aunt Rose shrugged, brushing feathers off her wrinkled coat. "He's gone to see his Aunt Prune, I suppose."

"I want to go to him," June said. "I know that's possible."

"I suppose you had Classics at your comprehensive," said Aunt Rose, and sneezed delicately, like a cat. "Really, these feathers—"

"I want you to send me to him."

"If I sent you there," Rose said, "you might not come back. Or he might not want to come back. It isn't my specialty either. If you're so clever, you've figured that out, too."

"I know you've sent people there before, so stop playing games with me!" June said.

"Your mother could tell you what to do when a lover leaves," Rose Read said in a voice like cream. "So why are you asking my advice?"

"She didn't go after him!" June shouted. "She had to stay here and look after me, didn't she?"

Rose Read drew herself up very tall, smoothing her hands down her sides. She looked almost pleased. "Very well," she said. "Fortunately Hell is a much cheaper trip, much nearer to hand than Australia. Are you ready? Good. So listen, because I'm only going to tell you this once."

20. Going to hell. Instructions and advice.

"If you don't let the sweater fall from your hands, if you follow the sleeve until it is only yarn, it will lead you to him. He won't be as you remember him, he's been eating his memories to keep warm. He is not asleep, but if you kiss him he'll wake up. Just like the fairy tales. His lips will be cold at first.

"Say to him, *Follow me*, and unravel the right arm of the sweater. It will take you to a better place, little thief. If you do it right and don't look back, then you can steal him out of the Bonehouse."

June stared instead at the birdcage, gilt and forlorn upon its single hinged leg. Down that was caught, like smoke in a sieve, in the grill of the cage. "What now?" she said. "Do you disappear in a puff of smoke, or wave a wand? Can I just leave?"

"Not through the door," Rose said. "It's time you had your flying lessons."

Rose Read stepped upon the windowsill, crouching in her coat like a great black wing beneath the weight of the moon. She held out her hand to June. "Come on. Are you afraid?"

June took her hand. "I won't be afraid," she said. She climbed up on the sill beside Rose, and pointed her shoes toward the moon, away from the scratch of quills against the walls and ceiling. She didn't look back, but stepped off the edge of the known world. ●

NEXT ISSUE

SPECIAL HOLIDAY TREAT

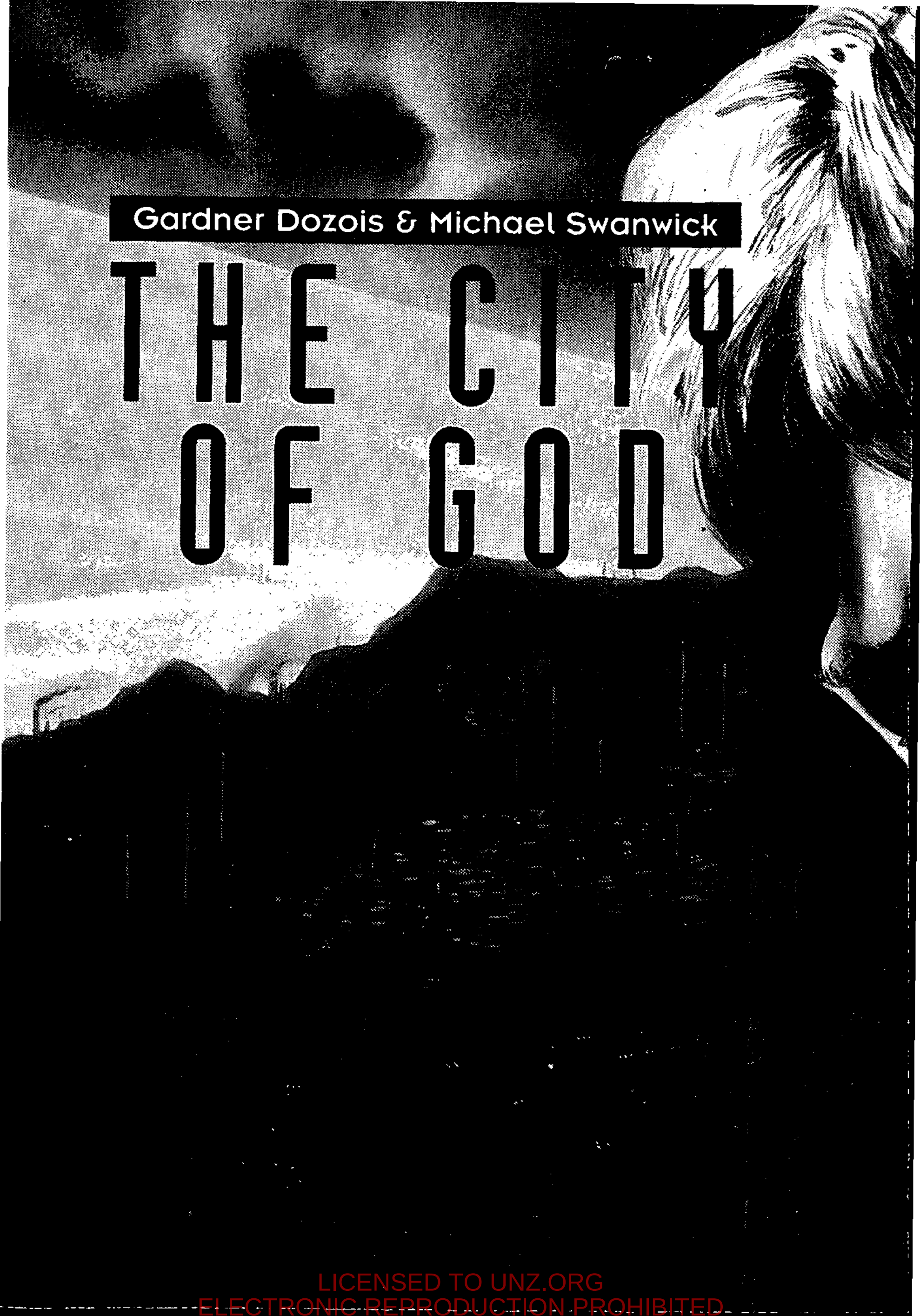
Well, in the wonderful world of Magazine Publishing, it's Christmastime again (even though it's June as I'm actually typing these words), and so, in keeping with long tradition, we're bringing you a Christmas story in our upcoming December issue. This year's holiday story is brought to you by multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis,** and it's quite a potent and tasty cup of Holiday Cheer she serves up, too, as she relates the disquieting story of what really goes on "In Coppelius's Toyshop." The rest of our December issue turns away from seasonal concerns to take us into the future, into the past, and clean out of our Galaxy.

BIG NAME WRITERS

Renowned British writer **Ian Watson,** one of the premier idea-men in the business, returns to take us to a bizarre future world that's strange and innovative even by his high standards, full of sinister talking parrots, menacing alien Snakes, and enigmatic Magic (or what appears to be Magic, from our perspective), to tell us the sad and evocative tale of "The Tragedy of Solveig"; **Mary Rosenblum,** one of our most popular writers, takes us to a frenetic high-tech future for a poignant look at how important "Yesterdays" can be especially when they're all you have; **James Patrick Kelly** takes us on a Magical Mystery Tour of his own, back to the chaotic days of the early 1970s, as a bemused young hippie gets a compelling lesson in "The First Law of Thermodynamics"; veteran author **Kit Reed** returns to explore the troubled soul of a teenager who has some very atypical problems, in "Whoever"; **Sonia Orin Lyris** takes us to a luxury vacation resort in a decadent future where the guests are locked in a deadly struggle over "The Angel's Share"; and **S.N. Dyer** explains how much it can help to have friends in High Places, even ones you don't know you have, in the sly and funny story of some very unusual "Gifts."

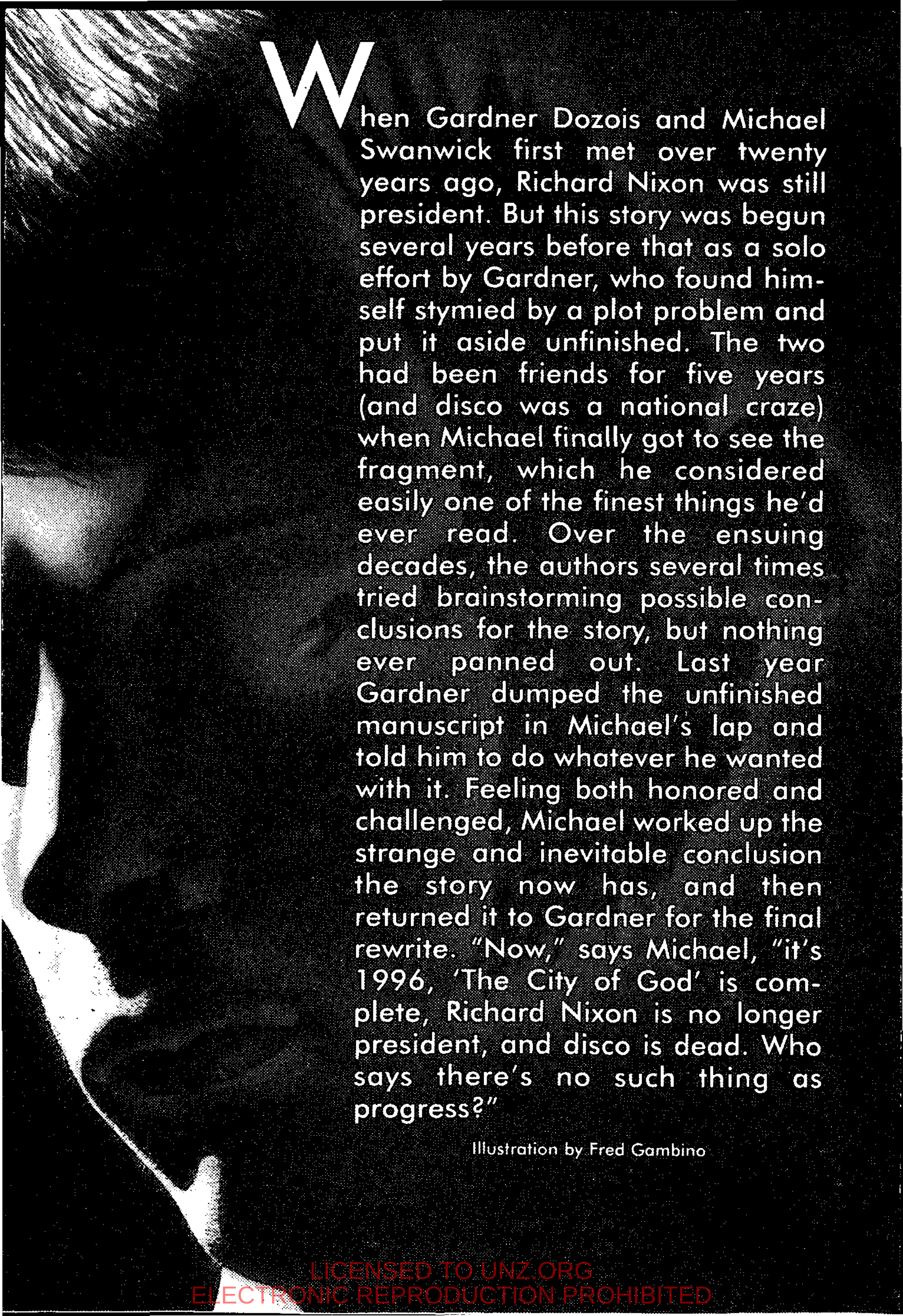
EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines "The Ablative Absolute"; **Norman Spinrad** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poems, cartoons, and other features. Look for our Special Holiday Issue on sale on your newsstands on October 15, 1996, or subscribe today and miss none of our upcoming issues.



Gardner Dozois & Michael Swanwick

THE CITY OF GOD



When Gardner Dozois and Michael Swanwick first met over twenty years ago, Richard Nixon was still president. But this story was begun several years before that as a solo effort by Gardner, who found himself stymied by a plot problem and put it aside unfinished. The two had been friends for five years (and disco was a national craze) when Michael finally got to see the fragment, which he considered easily one of the finest things he'd ever read. Over the ensuing decades, the authors several times tried brainstorming possible conclusions for the story, but nothing ever panned out. Last year Gardner dumped the unfinished manuscript in Michael's lap and told him to do whatever he wanted with it. Feeling both honored and challenged, Michael worked up the strange and inevitable conclusion the story now has, and then returned it to Gardner for the final rewrite. "Now," says Michael, "it's 1996, 'The City of God' is complete, Richard Nixon is no longer president, and disco is dead. Who says there's no such thing as progress?"

Illustration by Fred Gambino

It was high summer in Orange, in York, in the Human Domain of Earth. There was commerce in the town, crops in the field, beasts in the byre, bandits in the roads, thants and chimeras in the hills, and God in His Heaven—which was fifteen miles away, due east.

From where Hanson worked—on an open platform extending out from the side of the giant State Factory of Orange and nestling right up against the bare, rocky face of Industry Hill—it was possible to look east, out across the teeming squalor of Orange, and see the Wall of the City of God marching north-south across the horizon, *making* the horizon really: a radiant line drawn across the misty blue of distance, pink as a baby's thigh, pink as dawn. And to know that it stretched, in all its celestial arrogance, over two hundred miles to the north, and more than three hundred miles to the south, unbroken, cutting three-quarters of the Human Domain off from the sea—the City of God, perfect and inviolable, with a completeness that was too much for man. That was what Hanson must face every day when he came to work and stood in the sun and in his human sweat with his little shovel. That terrible, alien beauty, indifferent to mortality, forever at his back, a head's turn away, as he worked, as he grew old. And knowing that God and all the gods were in there, pure and incomprehensible as fire, maybe watching him right now, looking down over the Edge of the Wall and into the finite world: a huge watery eye, tall as the sky.

But no one ever thought much about God on shift, not for long. The sun was too hot in summer, the wind too bitter in winter, the work killing in any season, blighting and shriveling a man, draining him dry. There was too much sickness, not enough food, little medicine, little comfort, and only brief bitter joys. It soon became evident that God didn't care about man, that He paid no more attention to the misery swarming beneath the Wall of His City than man pays to the activities of beetles, that He had no more compassion for humanity's messy agonies than man had for the suffering and tribulations of mayflies. There were two State Temples of Burgen Catholicism visible in the sweep below, and even the encircled cross that marked a *kachina* shrine, a *kiva,* but none of them were very well attended. In spite of its proximity to the Wall of the City of God—or perhaps because of it—Orange was not a devoutly religious town.

Hanson leaned into his shovel and watched the blade disappear into the coal. The pile sloped up and back, toward the lips of the gullet, through which new lumps of coal would rattle slowly down onto the top of the heap every few seconds, obliging the shift to keep up a steady tempo of work to avoid being swamped. On heavy days they would have to shovel like fiends to keep up, dumping the coal down chutes into hoppers on the lower transport level of the factory. But no matter how much they sweated, the coal remained undiminished, replenished constantly from the top as fast as they could clear it away from the bottom: a glossy black mountain crawling sluggishly with the unending inching motion of the coal. Hanson had even stopped hating it, regarding it now as a condition to be endured, something too big, uncaring, and constant to rail against, impersonal as a thunderstorm. His mother had told him an ancient tale once—a few months before she'd died in one of the food riots that were an aftermath of the Campaign Against the South—about women with brooms trying to sweep the sea free of salt. He often thought about the tale while on shift, and unlimbered the flinty thing that had served him for a smile the past few years, since his wife Becky had died coughing blood in the White Winter four seasons back.

It seemed that everyone he had ever known and loved had died, one by one over the falling years, leaving him here in the barren center of nothing, living on and on, alone. He had never wanted it that way. He'd never asked for that.

Taking a step backward, Hanson scooped up a shovelful of coal, pivoted smoothly, and tossed it over the curb and into the chute, turning back for another shovelful without bothering to watch the first fall. After years on the job, he could send a steady stream of coal anywhere he wanted it, with pinpoint accuracy, almost without looking. He placed his foot on the blade, dug it back into the pile, and stopped. Normally he would work like this for hours without stopping, steady as a mechanical thing, his motions flowing into an unbroken cycle. But today—today he could not keep his mind on his job, today he was like a child, distracted by anything, everything, the wind, the sky, the light glinting from his shovel blade. He leaned on the shovel, buried up to the handle in the pile, and watched the gullet spit up some more coal.

Somewhere up there, miles deep into the slope, miles beneath Industry Hill, maybe even halfway to Pitt, one of the last surviving Utopian autominers was burrowing and wallowing like a steel whale through a deep vein of coal, exploring the secret roots of the world. No—it was blind, and ate its way past wonders it could never see, so maybe tapeworm would be a better analogy than whale: a robotic, reactor-powered tapeworm that gnawed through Earth's bowels with adamantine teeth, insatiably tracing the tightening convolutions of the intestines, passing the ore through its indestructible body and voiding it back along the endless tail of the conveyor field to the mouth of the gullet. Where it dribbled onto the pile and tumbled slowly down the grade so that Hanson or one of his shift-mates could scoop it up with a shovel and dump it into a hopper. Hanson had wondered once or twice at the Factory, at Orange, at the State of York—at the incongruity of a society that must use unbelievably sophisticated machines and primitive hand-labor as integral parts of the same industrial process. Horses pulled the loaded ore-hoppers across Orange to the Docks, where a monster Utopian transport waited to carry it on the long journey to the ancient blast furnaces in Pitt, then skirting the

Wall to the pockets of industry in the Chesapeake country, and then to the South. Horses and transports, autominers and shovels. The Utopian machines were used where they could be used, to do the magic work no army of ordinary men could do. Where they couldn't be used, where there were no machines anymore to be used for *that,* then the gap was filled in with hand-labor, with sweat and broken backs and sudden heart attacks. There were plenty of people after all.

And most of those people found nothing odd in the arrangement. Hanson had once worked with the Utopian autominers, years ago, before factory politics and the enmity of Oristano the foreman had started him on the long road down to the Pit, and when he had first arrived at the Pit, at the rock bottom of his career with nowhere to go except death, he had remarked to old Relk in a mixture of bitterness and grim humor that it was too bad they couldn't scrape up a Goddamned Utopian machine to do the Goddamn shoveling. Relk had merely gaped blankly at him, unable to understand—Hanson might as well have spoken in a foreign language. Work was work; magic was magic; and that was that. Relk could see no incongruities, no connections between the two. He'd sniffed disapprovingly at Hanson and told him he wouldn't last long in the Pit.

But Hanson had worked like a hill demon his first few months in the Pit, and had finally replaced the old shift-leader, Ricciardi, after Ricciardi had died of a heart attack on the job. But that didn't cut any ice with Relk, "that didn't make no never mind" with him, as he would have said. No one lasted in the Pit as long as Relk, in the end. Others were transient; Relk was a permanent fixture.

Relk was staring at him now, his leather face wrinkling facilely into deep-worn lines of displeasure, so that he looked like a shriveled, thousand-year-old monkey with a bellyache. Hanson realized that he had been hesitating for a couple of minutes, leaning on his shovel and watching the gullet. He cursed himself wearily. As shift-leader, Hanson had the responsibility of pacing the work, setting the tempo and rhythm. He couldn't allow himself the luxury of daydreams—at least he wasn't supposed to. Angrily he scooped up another shovelful of coal, dumped it, came back for another. He forced himself back into the rhythm, concentrating on the movement of his body.

Relk snorted sourly and began shoveling again. Relk had never thought much of Hanson as a shift-leader. Hanson wasn't dedicated enough. Old Relk had worked the Pit for more than thirty-five years—his skin burned black, his skinny, knotted, cordwood body indestructible—and he'd seen at least ten shift-leaders come and go. None of them had been dedicated enough. Relk was dedicated—so dedicated his intelligence had long ago sunk down to the subhuman, which was why he'd never been chosen for shift-leader. He was totally absorbed by his job. He *was* his job, so much so that he no longer had any separate existence or identity. In many ways, then, he was the ideal citizen of Orange. He made Hanson's flesh crawl.

Hanson glanced surreptitiously down the line to see if anyone else had noticed his lapse. Gossard, next down beyond Relk, seemed oblivious to the world, grimly absorbed in his task. He was a little slower in the shoveling than the others—his motions faltered occasionally, the big blade wobbled every so often in his hands. His pale, globular body glistened slickly with sweat. The Pit was hard on Gossard. He was a good man, a friend, and a conscientious worker, but he was absurdly fat—the sickly, flabby fat of a glandular imbalance; few men got enough to eat in Orange to become fat in the traditional manner—and his weight told cruelly on him, especially in the summer. But he was trapped; he wasn't a fast enough worker to merit advancement out of the Pit, and the blacklist would deny him employment elsewhere if he should quit his job. It was hard enough to live on State salary; people without jobs often didn't live at all. If Gossard wanted his family to survive, he had to work here. It would kill him someday. The coal dust bothered him too, and he coughed constantly, great wracking coughs that set his fat to quivering like lard poured into a tub. Hanson wondered sometimes if the dust or a stroke would get Gossard first.

Beyond Gossard were the two workers with unpronounceable names who didn't speak Mercan very well: one burly, bland and butter-colored; the other as dead-black as the coal, amazingly slight for Pit work, all whipcord muscle and jittery nervous energy—the track marks were vivid up and down his arms and legs, and some days his eyes were nothing but whites swimming with ruptured blood vessels, but as long as he did his work, nobody would complain until the day he finally collapsed. They were openly queer, sitting with sweaty arms wrapped around each other's necks during breaks and joking in their rapid, incomprehensible dialect, singing and fondling each other in the washroom, grinning obscenely at the other men. Nobody cared about that either, and some people openly envied them: women had been scarce in Orange for a number of years now. Hanson had privately named them Tic and Tac. Tic was now working with insane speed, but spastically, spilling coal, doing a jittery skipping dance dangerously close to the curb with every stroke, unable to remain still even for a second. Tac was slyly screwing off as usual, his face crafty as a cat's, but Hanson didn't feel like calling him on it so soon after his own dereliction.

He used his return swing for an excuse to glance to his left, where he had been wanting to look from the first, made hesitant by guilt and apprehension. They had put the New Man there this morning, just to Hanson's left, ostensibly so that Hanson could keep an eye on him. Hanson knew better. Hanson and Oristano the foreman had been deadly enemies for almost a decade and they understood each other with that special intense intimacy reserved for feuders and lovers. And Oristano's obscene shark grin this morning, as he introduced the New Man, had told the whole story. Oristano knew Hanson's pride, knew how it had been slowly battered down over the years until being the fastest, hardest worker in the Pit was the last thing Hanson had left to be proud of, knew how Hanson clung to that brag with the desperation of a drowning man.

And that it was no longer true.

The New Man was working with the dazzling, rock-steady rhythm he had displayed all morning, calm, fluid, and unrestrained, not even breathing hard. He was a huge bull of a man, a coffee-colored giant with kinky, flaming red hair. He was a solid barrel of muscle, carrying not an ounce of fat, and he was *young*. He was very young. Hanson had been a factory legend in his own time, but he was almost twenty years older than the New Man, and each day of those years sat like lead on his arms and legs, like a bar of iron across his shoulders. Hanson knew that he couldn't beat the New Man, not now, not after half a lifetime of killing labor—the New Man was young, magnificently fresh, fed by a hundred biological springs that had dried up in Hanson long ago.

He just couldn't keep up with him. That was bitter; that was very hard.

Maybe he never would have been able to match this monster, even in his prime.

That was unendurable.

The New Man had seen him daydreaming, like a toothless old fool, just when he would have been establishing his status over the younger man, when he should have been proving that he was still the hardest working slug in the Pit. He had shamed himself before the New Man, he had disgraced his reputation at the very moment that he needed it the most. He was too old, his brain was going, he couldn't think anymore. Somebody should shoot him if he was getting that senile, roll him in a ditch, cover him up before he started to rot out in the open air. And the New Man was easily matching Hanson's quickest pace, with the unthinking grace and sureness of the young. In fact, it was obvious that he could go much faster if he wanted to but that he was restraining himself, he was deliberately holding himself back to Hanson's slower tempo.

The New Man was being *polite*.

And Hanson stopped thinking, except with his body.

Hanson began working faster, without volition—faster and faster, like a mechanical toy speeding up to a blur, wound too tight, out of control.

The New Man matched him easily, stroke for stroke.

Gossard faltered, dropped out. Tic and Tac kept up a little longer and then stopped, panting, watching in awe. Old Relk continued to work at his own personal speed, ignoring everybody, shaking his head at the decadence of the world.

The New Man had finally moved ahead of Hanson, opening up all the way. Hanson couldn't keep up. Already he had fallen three or four strokes behind—

To Hanson, it was as if the sun had melted and poured down over him in a cascade of scalding molten gold—he breathed it stabbingly into his lungs, it stripped the flesh from his bones, it broiled the marrow in the sockets, it piled up mountainously on his shoulders and crushed him with the weight of the sky. Slowly his legs buckled under the mass of the sky-mountain. He was talking to Becky now, and they were walking together through a high open meadow where the grass and trees were made all of ice, and flowers sprinkled like searfrost. But he couldn't keep up with her because the mountain was too heavy and he couldn't put it down. He tried to run after her but the mountain crushed him like a giant's thumb and the icy ground softened to mud under his feet, and he sank into it under the mountain, floundering, sinking deeper and deeper. No matter what, he had to

stop.

He did.

The shovel saved Hanson from actually falling. He leaned against it, legs rubbery, knees flexed, breath rasping in his throat. Oristano's face swam under his eyelids. It superimposed itself over the coal-mountain, the two things merging into an inhuman, undefeatable entity—a god of black malignancy. He opened his eyes. Slowly, his vision cleared. Planes of bloody shadow resolved into the New Man, who was staring at him with a worried, embarrassed expression. He caught Hanson's eye and smiled hesitantly—he didn't want to rub Hanson's face in his victory. He was still being very polite.

Gossard caught the tension in the air and went doggedly back to work, not wanting to watch Hanson's final humiliation. Tac made an obscure, fatalistic gesture with his fingertips; Tic stroked his shoulder, pursed wet lips—they started shoveling again. Relk looked around with an air of sly, senile vindication, made a muffled *hunh* sound and turned away, muttering something about dedication to the coal pile as he dug his blade into it.

Hanson drew himself up. His arms and back throbbed as if they had been beaten with clubs and there was no strength in his legs; he wobbled in spite of his best efforts to brace himself. The New Man pretended not to notice. Hanson ran his tongue around his lips, tasted blood, swallowed it. Defeat slumped his spine, burned his brain to ash. He waited for some ashen thought to filter down through his new ash brain, but no thought came—it was as barren as the Moon. Sternly, he took control of his face, and forced himself to smile back at the New Man. It wasn't really his fault; he was a good boy. Blame himself instead. Blame Oristano. Blame Time.

The New Man relaxed, visibly relieved—his smile broadened into a grin from which, with all the best will in the world, it was impossible for him to keep a trace of satisfied triumph. This is his hour, Hanson thought, let him enjoy it. He was being good about it anyway, out of respect for Hanson's reputation. How very strange that was. When had living admiration become respect for a legend? How could the line have slipped up on him and past without his notice? Had he been that blind? Wasn't he still the same man he'd always been, below the old bones?

The New Man fished in his pocket and came up with a narc. He scratched the stick on his hip; the narc flared and then guttered to an orange ember-glow at its tip. A wisp of smoke curled up around his massive forearm like the ghost of a snake. The New Man offered the narc to Hanson: a friendly monster, smiling and huge, sweat runneling his broad face.

Hanson hesitated, studying the sweaty giant, and then took the narc. He put the horn-tipped end of the resin stick in his mouth and sipped deeply, holding a smoldering pine forest in his lungs. The New Man produced another narc. They stood smoking together while the sun baked them dry of sweat. Coal rustled unheeded around their feet.

"Hot sumbitch, a'n't it?" the New Man said.

"Ai," Hanson said, trying not to sound too much like a dead man. Prodding himself: "A'ways is, this time of year. Freeze your ass off in winter though. A'ways one or the other, up here. You a'n't never going to be comfortable."

"Ai."

The New Man was staring out across the sweep of Orange: seas of hunched, dirty roofs, narrow alleys, smoke-belching chimneys, here and there the broken skeleton of a ruined Utopian building towering above the squalor, picked clean, naked and pathetic. "Can see a hell of a ways, though, up here," the New Man said enthusiastically. "Most all of the city I'll bet, near about."

"Ai, the whole Goddamn shitpile." He wouldn't turn his head to look at the Wall, though he was sharply aware of its presence. It beat against him like a hand of light, the knowledge of that golden, heartless thing.

Far as Hanson could tell from here, the Wall marched across the whole world and never came to an end. The Goddamned thing just never ended at all.

He blinked back sudden tears of rage and sorrow so great they squeezed his heart.

"Come on," he said, and punched the giant in the shoulder. And picked up his shovel.

And somehow he managed to keep working throughout the afternoon, although his mind was not there at all most of the time. His body seemed to manage well enough without it.

It was dark by the time the shift ended. Hanson gave the signal to quit work, and they shouldered their tools and shuffled single file along the curb to the lip of the Pit.

Oristano met them at the lip.

To Hanson, the foreman looked like a gross manikin sculpted from shadow, a hunched puddle of darkness that even starlight couldn't melt, merely glinting dully from teeth and eyes. He was backlit by the furnace glare that escaped around the iron doors behind him, and his bloated silhouette suddenly seemed to be that of a monster toad crouched in a smoldering sulfur swamp, waiting for weary flies to spiral hopelessly down within reach. Hanson could almost see the sticky, supple frog-tongue licking out, flickering impatiently down and around the foreman's waist. Then Oristano stepped forward, and the rough blob of his head split open to reveal an ugly, tooth-glinting grin. Oristano was big, half a head shorter than Hanson, but built broader and heavier. Hanson could remember him as a svelte bear of a man, covered with bristly black hair, clumsy but very powerful, and with a bear's sick, uncertain temper. Time and ease had added weight until now he was grossly fat—not the flabby stuff of Gossard's affliction, but tight-packed and well-muscled lard that made him look even more dangerous than he had in the past. Usually he was brusque with Hanson, and the two spoke little to each other, making no attempt to hide their dislike. Tonight he greeted Hanson with boisterous good cheer and an exaggerated oily courtesy, asking Hanson in a loud voice if the New Man had worked out all right.

"Yes," Hanson answered quietly, "he works very well." The shovel felt incredibly heavy against his bruised shoulder. He bowed grudgingly under its weight. Alternate waves of hot and cold ran along his body, and a faint nausea returned. He could sense the New Man somewhere off to his right, embarrassed again, made uneasy by the sadistic malice in Oristano's voice and the weary, beaten hatred in Hanson's, aware that the two older men were acting out some ritual that he couldn't quite understand but in which he had played an integral part.

"He's a good worker, ai?" Oristano boomed.

"Yes," Hanson said.

Oristano grinned, another flash of crooked teeth. "Good, good." Flash again. "That's *good,* ai?"

Hanson nodded dully.

"*Ai.*" Oristano laughed, and waved a ponderous arm. Factory artisans rolled the fire door open—the sudden blast of hot light sent Oristano's shadow leaping out, swelling and elongating fantastically, washing over Hanson—and began to carry equipment out. Hanson's shift moved up from the curb, swirling around Hanson, and filed along the platform behind the lip to make room. The new shift waited by the fire doors as the artisans gingerly carried old spotlights out to position them along the curb. The line of artisans broke around Oristano: ants around a boulder.

Neither man had moved. Oristano bulked like an ogre on the platform, goblin-grin glistening wetly. Hanson remained at the junction of curb and lip, shovel still slung across his shoulders, watching wearily.

The artisans had clamped the spotlights to the curb at intervals, muzzles tilted up at an angle so that their glare wouldn't blind the shovelers, but would give enough light to work the Pit. Now they were stringing much-patched wires back along the underside of the curb, where they'd be out of the way of pivoting feet, and testing connections. The spotlights came on one by one, at low intensity: a herd of giant rheumy orange eyes—dinosaurs jostling down in the dark to drink. The nearest spot spilled shifting orange patterns across Hanson's knotted back, up and along the bulge of Oristano's naked belly. Then the spot came on at full strength, slicing a white column through jet. In the sudden glare, Hanson could see Oristano's face clearly for the first time that evening: heavy-jowled, eyes pinched shut with fat; lips absurdly small and delicate; a mashed, shattered nose laced with old white scars, hair peeking in tufts from the nostrils. The same beam illuminated the upper half of the pile and the ceaseless crawling of the coal.

All this, all these years, Hanson thought in numb horror, because I once broke Oristano's nose in a tavern brawl, in front of the men of the factory.

Nothing ever ended. Five minutes of his past had birthed all the rest of his life.

Hanson shifted the weight of the shovel and stepped up onto the lip. He walked past Oristano without looking at him and continued steadily on across the platform to the fire door. Oristano laughed again, an ugly clotted sound, and followed Hanson with his eyes, although he disdained to turn his head.

Fifteen years of shuffling around the giant factory, going from one section to another, from job to job, always falling lower, but always hanging on to one more hope—fifteen years, and now it was all over. He was finished. The New Man would be shift-leader tomorrow, although he didn't know it yet. Hanson would not come back. Oristano had known that he wouldn't. And without a job in Orange, barred from work by quitting the factory, Hanson was a dead man. He might as well lie down now and wait for the scavengers. It was all over with him.

Without saying a word, Hanson collected his shift and led them out through the fire doors, through the guts of the factory toward the washroom. He did not look back.

Behind him, Oristano smiled.

Hanson washed up slowly, working the tarnished brass pump, watching the hypnotically rhythmical spurts of rusty water fill the basin. His face was expressionless, and he ignored the other men in his shift. Relk, as usual, had merely changed into his civilian clothes and left, without bothering to wash, without bothering to say goodbye. Tic and Tac splashed noisily at the far basin, talking in a rapid stream of gutturals and fricatives. Gossard wallowed in armfuls of water, blowing like a whale. The New Man washed quietly, dressed, and then hesitated by Hanson's basin on the way out, feeling obliged to say something to the older man but afraid to speak. Hanson did not look up. After several moments, the New Man shrugged, shook his head, and left. Hanson continued to wash, stolidly, turning his arms over and over under the pump.

Moving with deliberation, he soaped the salty patches of dried sweat from his body, lifted the heavy ceramic basin, and poured the brackish water over his head, carefully pumped the basin full, and rinsed himself again. While he was doing this, Tic and Tac went out, each staring at him as they went by—Tac looking at him with morbid, insolent curiosity, as if he were examining a particularly interesting corpse, and Tic rolling his eyes in a quick sideways motion, as if he were afraid to look at Hanson directly, as if Hanson were the carrier of a disease so virulent it could be contracted by a glance. Hanson stood like a statue, holding the basin over his head, letting the water flatten his thinning black hair, cascade over his shoulders, pour in runnels down his legs. His eyes were fixed and unblinking. Tic and Tac hurried out, and didn't look back.

When the basin was empty, Hanson put it down and picked up a coarse towel, moving no more than necessary. He heard Gossard come up behind him, hesitating as the New Man had, a few steps away. Hanson rubbed himself down methodically, not turning around. Gossard shifted his weight uneasily from foot to foot, unconsciously sighing and massaging his stomach. Hanson could hear him breath: labored, wheezing, strangled by fat. He wouldn't last much longer, Hanson thought again. His heart, one day on the shift. Or a stroke. Or the dust. The thought made Hanson sad and almost pierced the wall that humiliation and the loss of status were building around him—he felt a momentary desire to talk to the fat man, to confess the shame and agony. To share his friendship while he's still alive, Hanson realized, in a wave of black fury. Before the job kills him. Like it will kill all of us eventually, one by one, until only old Relk is left. Or until we all become like him: dead, but still walking. Hanson snapped the towel viciously against his calf, relishing the sting, and began to rub himself down again. Anger had rebuilt the walls of his shame, and he pointedly ignored Gossard, keeping his back turned. Why should one corpse talk to another? About what? Gossard cleared his throat obstreperously without eliciting any response, walked suddenly to the door, paused, and came slowly back.

"Carl?"

"Yes?" Hanson replied, without turning his head.

"Are you all right?"

Hanson's cheeks flamed. Half a lifetime leaped in his throat, tangled itself hopelessly in his tongue, refused to pass his lips. What he said was: "Yes."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

Silence, Hanson standing motionless with the towel clutched in his hands like a snake, and then Gossard said "Is there—" and Hanson said "No," almost simultaneously.

Gossard tried again: "If there's anything I can do—"

"No."

Then, forcing himself to speak:

"No. Thank you, John, but no. Nothing."

Then:

"There is nothing that can be done."

There was a long silence, and Hanson did not move at all. Gossard didn't speak again. After a while, he went away, closing the door gently behind him. The sound of his heavy footsteps dwindled into distance, was gone.

Hanson was alone.

The fading gurgle of water down sunken drains, the slow drip-drip of a faulty pump. The single carbon lamp flared and dimmed regularly with the beat of hidden dynamos, a brassy illumination washing across the stone walls and floor, ebbing from a beach of shadows. The air was heavy with old sweat. The room was full of ghosts.

Hanson was still for a moment longer, then, like a statue coming to life, he crushed the towel into a ball and hurled it viciously away, shuddering with disgust. He took a staggering step to a basin, braced his arms against it, and took three deep breaths, his backbone rising and falling with the effort. Gradually his breathing slowed. He became a statue again.

He had been sure he was going to be sick, but he couldn't: the sickness clogged somewhere in the very back of his throat, too deep ever to be regurgitated.

He pushed himself away from the basin, walked rapidly and violently to the center of the washroom, and stopped, looking around uncertainly, shaking his head, baffled. He started out again with great vigor, stopped after two steps, casting quick, frightened glances around him, seeing through the walls to the labyrinth of factory corridors, the maze of his life. He grimaced, rubbed his hands along his ribs, forced himself into motion, his steps dragging as if he were wading into quicksand, four steps, five, and he was halted again—stopped dead by inertia. He could feel the factory above him, below him, holding him in its belly, crushing down against his shoulders, anchoring his feet deep in its alien earth.

There was no place to go.

There was nothing to do.

There were no options left open to him.

Appalled, he allowed himself to drift back into the washroom, away from the door, along the row of basins, along the row of urinals. The stone under his feet was stained and porous, slightly damp—it felt like flesh. The air was delicately webbed with ancient piss, the light was spiky and hurtful against Hanson's eyes, his shadow drifted listlessly with him, across the grimy walls—the ghost of a ghost. He fetched up against the far wall, turned restlessly, and pushed into a wooden commode stall. The commode was old—stone-lipped, and earthen-breathed from the huge sump beneath the factory. It was now considered a luxury, and the use of it an incentive to work; the factory had been built in somewhat more prosperous times—the interlude between the Third Plague and the disastrous Campaign Against The South—when the State had been able to afford spending money and materials on such things, and when artisans sufficiently talented to build such a system were common enough to waste on nonessentials. Hanson had been raised with outhouses and nightjars at best, slit trenches or hand-scooped holes at worst, and still found the big stone commode alien and faintly menacing, in spite of years at the factory. He stared at it dumbly, as if expecting it to speak in a septic voice of decay.

Habit took over. Automatically, he sat down, tried to move his bowels. All the while, he watched himself, as if from a vantage point outside his body—one part of his mind was sardonically amused, one part was very afraid, and one part was murderously angry. The fearful part kept him going through the mundane actions of his normal life by rote, making him wash, dry himself, excrete—all rather desperately, as if by clinging to familiar routine he could negate and unmake the horrors of the day. The sardonic part was amused by the incongruity of trying to cling to normalcy when his life had just been blighted, destroyed, turned upside down, of carrying out the minutiae of life when he was dead. The angry part watched both others, and despised them both, and grew ever more angry at the conditions that had produced them—it knew nothing but hate.

There was an open, latticed window in the wall, giving a fine overview of the torchlit sprawl of nighttime Orange, but Hanson refused to look at it. He watched the wide lip of the window instead, the iron bars set in stone, the intricate networks of cracks and chips, the patterns of dirt and small pebbles, the mummified bodies of flies—watched them until they had no meaning to him anymore, until they were completely alien to him, incomprehensible, and then he watched nothing at all, just as intently although his eyes were no longer focused. The stone underneath his buttocks was cold, and the night wind through the window was damp on his naked body. Instinctively, he brought his knees closer to his chin, wrapped his arms around his legs. He sat alone and naked in the cold belly of the factory, surrounded by yards of chill stone and the even colder ruins of his life, rocking back and forth, hugging his knees. This was the time to cry—he knew it, wanted to, longed for the release crying would bring. But the tears would not come. They hung, burning, somewhere behind his eyes, but they would not fall. Tears were for the living, not the dead.

And he could not move his bowels, although his stomach ached. He was completely dead now, dry, sterile, shriveled, his blood curdled in his veins, his seed killed in the sack, his bodily openings sewed tightly shut. He moved a hand through the thick tangle of hair on his chest—his skin was slick and cold as rock and he was unable to feel his heartbeat—across his ribs, along his huge arms, his massive, corded legs. There was a roll of fat beginning at his waist, in spite of work, in spite of his poor diet. The muscles were beginning to sag slightly on the undersides of his arms and thighs, and veins stood out on his legs as if they were done in relief. He was losing his hair and his skin was starting to crack and yellow, like sun-baked mud. He was getting old. And there was a dull pain in his stomach, always present, although sometimes it would stir sluggishly, like a blunt-headed beast inside him that wanted to get out. The Crab was in there—he had suspected it for months, known it for weeks, finally admitted it to himself. He had seen the Crab take his uncle, his cousin, his brother's wife, his friend Matthew, and now it was going to take him. It would take him within the year.

And what had his life been *for?*

Hanson stopped rocking. He sat very still, listening to the world wind down, listening to his body decay. Now it was as if his mind was a blinking light, first flashing red, then black. When it flashed black he would huddle freezing and paralyzed, immobilized by despair and futility, unable to move, unable to think. When it flashed red, he regained the ability to move, but only in one direction; to think, but only one thought—his frozen limbs thawed in the furnace of rage, but the furnace had been stoked for only one purpose. The light of his mind flashed black and red, red and black, and each time the red light remained on a little longer than the black, and longer, and longer still, like a spun coin wobbling toward collapse, until finally the black light vanished completely and the red light blazed as steady and smoky as blood.

Hanson got to his feet, pushed out of the commode stall—the wooden door boomed with hollow finality in the silence, in the empty room.

Moving quickly and surely, he dressed, laced on his boots, and left the washroom. There was no hesitation in him now: he was all economy and efficiency, his actions flowing together as smoothly as quicksilver as he threaded the factory corridors. He walked with a steady, springy stride, full of authority and self-assurance, cruising through the building like a big, dark clipper ship under full sail. There were few people about at this time of night, and none of those that he encountered thought to question him, or even paid any attention to him at all—he too obviously knew where he was going and why. His expression was calm and absorbed; only a close look would have revealed the strain in that face, the tiny lines around the eyes, the bloodless tension of his lips.

He crossed half the width of the giant building to a little-used stairway, ascended two levels, went out a storeroom window, across a low roof, up a metal ladder in the inky darkness, in another window—squeezing awkwardly between the two boards that haphazardly sealed it—up one more level by another dusty back stairway, along a deserted corridor, and so arrived back at the shift room unseen. He knew the rounds of all the watchmen and State Inspectors perfectly, by the second and by the inch, and he had dodged three of them by this roundabout route, passing successfully through their territories just before or just after they did: the watchmen would swear that no one could have passed them unobserved, and that might help to cloud matters a little, or so the rational layer of his mind hoped, although he was too far gone now to worry much about consequences—he had acted mostly out of an animal instinct that had told him not to let himself be seen, to avoid other men because he was, in this moment, alien to them.

The shift room was empty, echoing and too bright under the carbon lamps. The big metal lockers looked like rows of drab tombstones, light winking coldly and malevolently from their polished faces. Hanson crossed the room unhurriedly and used one of his keys to open a locker. He took out a shovel, carefully doctored the supply sheet to make it appear that the shovel had been issued to one of the men now on shift, and closed the locker up again. Then he walked to a door half-hidden by the row of lockers, opened it with another key, stepped briskly inside, and locked it behind him.

This was a big supply room, seldom in use: dark, smothering, full of the slumbering, shrouded shapes of crates and barrels, steeped through with pungent, unidentifiable stinks. The only light came from far on the other side of the room, very dim and pale, as if it were leaking in from another world.

Hanson made his way slowly through this dusty tangle, oozing around the nearly invisible crates with preternatural ease, making no sound. In the darkness, he appeared less human, more feral: thicker and broader, bulkier, goblin-shaped and glitter-eyed, too sure and catfooted for a man. He held the heavy, iron-bladed shovel like a twig, like a fey child with a switch.

A rectangle of smoky light: a door.

Hanson settled down to wait, squatting on his hams behind a tall packing crate. He knew Oristano's schedule as well as he knew every other detail of factory routine, knew it in both the overt and covert details, as the foreman was a creature of long-established habit in all things. The second night crew had gone on shift about a half hour before; in an hour, Oristano would go on an inspection tour of those sections under his authority, poking and prying and making the workers uncomfortable, as he was hired to do. In the meanwhile, he would be in there fucking fat Emily, the tumorous whore from the Bog, on the cot in his office. In about a half hour, Oristano would finish fucking fat Emily, they would share the obligatory cigarette, and he would let her out the other door—she had another regular appointment on the hour, with Oristano's immediate superior. Then Oristano would cook a C and M speedball—crystal cocaine and morphine—over a small brazier, bang himself with it, and settle down to wait for the rush, and to drink enough corn whisky to ensure that he was in a sufficiently evil mood for his tour. After the whore left, he would be alone in his office for a half to three-quarters of an hour: no one would dare disturb him then, no matter what. Everyone knew better.

A muffled jumble of sound: voices.

Oristano would be alone.

A shrill laugh, silence, the sound of bedsprings.

Hanson hefted the shovel in his hands.

The dust tickled his nose and tiny spiders scampered across his arms, across his face, like the touch of gentle, invisible fingers. They were the shy, albino spiders that inhabit dusty corners in dark buildings and spin gossamer out of disuse—they never saw the sun. They used Hanson for a highway, washing over him in a waterfall of velvet feet while he sat in the shadows and listened to the factory: the massive, deep-throated beat of pistons far below re-echoed through every joint and seam of the building, conducted through cement and wood, shaking the room, shaking his blood, shaking the teeth in his head, shaking the brain inside his skull, boom*doom,* boom*doom,* boom*doom,* boom*doom,* until he was somehow on his feet, shaking uncontrollably, convulsively squeezing wood to keep it in his hands, shaking, being shaken, jarred, jostled, jolted, being frogmarched toward the door in a lurching stiff-legged stride, trying to remember that he had to wait, *wait,* although it was hard to remember what he had to wait for. He stopped just outside the door, fingertips resting on the wood, wondering why it didn't explode inward under the force of the pressure behind him, why it didn't shatter and fly to flinders, as he was shaken by the surge of the world that wrenched his bones out of his body, boom *doom,* boom *doom.*

Inside, voices again, louder now, another laugh, footsteps going away, the slamming of another and more distant door, a single set of heavy footsteps returning.

Suddenly smooth as silk and steady as sin, as if he had instantly shifted into a different gear, Hanson reached out and opened the door.

The room was dingy and cluttered: a table, two chairs, a cot, a wash basin, a cabinet. Oristano's broad back was toward the door—he had not heard it open. He was rummaging in the cabinet, taking out a hypodermic needle and a rusty spoon. An ancient revolver, symbol of his position and authority, sat in its holster on the table, three feet away.

Now, said Hanson's blood, *while his back is turned.* But instead he heard his own voice, as if from a great distance, speaking Oristano's name aloud, as a rock might speak, or ice.

Oristano knew death when he heard it. Without bothering to look around, he whirled and snatched for the table. His shadow swung and scurried like a crab behind him. He was awesomely fast for a man of his bulk. He had the gun in his hand and had brought it halfway around to bear before Hanson's shovel, swung in a short horizontal arc of immense force, crushed his head.

The force of the blow spun Oristano in a misty explosion of blood and brains, and hurled him heavily against the table, which splintered and collapsed. The table and Oristano went down together, in a tangle.

Except for the meaty slap of the shovel and the crack of breaking wood, there had been no sound.

The hypodermic needle teetered on the edge of the cabinet, then toppled very slowly to the floor. It shattered with a tiny glass cry, like the breaking of a fragile dream.

Hanson stood motionless, holding the shovel. His arms tingled from impact, and a splinter had dug into his palm. The blow had nearly decapitated Oristano, and the body, in falling, had sprayed blood across half the room, the cot, the ceiling. Most of the spray had missed Hanson, but his face had been lightly, almost delicately, dusted with a fine sprinkling of droplets, as if he were a child playing at measles with garish red paint. He took one hand off the shovel and absently wiped at his eyes with his knuckles, smearing the blood. He continued to wipe at it, grinding it into his skin.

He looked down at Oristano's body. With his killing blow, with the first touch of impact, the red light in Hanson's mind had instantly gone out, leaving him with no purpose or plan, drowned in the paralytic black light of despair. Now he was like a man waking, stupid and desolate, from a particularly evil dream—or else like a man swimming down from the border of dream into another, even more troubled sleep, unable to wake although he knows that he should. The room around him seemed blurred and vague, his memory of the past hour even more vague; he remembered his actions as if another man had done them while he watched, only dimly able to guess at that man's motives and feelings. Oristano's bloated corpse filled him with surprise and horror. He felt no emotional responsibility for it as yet, no sense of it being a child of his hands, but it seemed so charged with *outré* significance, so remarkable and unnatural an object in itself, that it flooded him with superstitious dread: he could imagine the shattered, faceless man rising, confronting him, embracing him with cold arms, smothering him. Absorbing him tracelessly into its bulk.

And now there was a sickness starting deep inside, a spreading numbness that drove the room even further away. He shook his head stupidly, baffled as a bull. He couldn't wake up. The room spitefully refused to change, to alter—it remained starkly and harshly the same, and he mired in the middle of it with murder in his hand and death all around. And now there was a noise, a scrape of wood on wood. Through numbing waves of nausea, he looked up.

Tac stood in the doorway: face bland as butter, eyes shrewd and malefic.

There was his doom, Hanson realized with tranced calm and logic. Tac was poised for flight, holding the door ready to slam after him; he was the entire length of the room away, on the other side of Oristano's body; from that other door the main entrance of the shift room was only six paces distant, down a short corridor—even if Hanson should try to attack him, all Tac would have to do was slam the door and run out into the shift room, shouting for help. Long before Hanson could hope to catch up to him and silence him—if Hanson could get his numb, leaden body to move at all—Tac would have the place boiling with workmen, watchmen, State Inspectors. Escape would be impossible—they would run him down in seconds, subdue him, take him away. Then the gallows, the block, a bullet in the head, maybe a public stoning or the stake since this had been a dull season in Orange. No way out. No way to stop Tac, no way to talk him into silence. Tac would surely get a big promotion for turning Hanson in, and Hanson had nothing to bribe him with anywhere near the value. And to appeal to the charity of that sly, cruel creature would be like entreating fire not to burn.

All this in a second, Tac looming in the doorway, Hanson staring hopelessly at him across the tilted landscape of Oristano's corpse. Then, before either man had a chance to move, Tac's face suddenly changed: his slitted eyes widened enormously, huge with surprise; his cheeks puffed, his mouth gaped impossibly—all his broad face, all his stubby body seemed to swell, blowing up like a balloon, expanding like a pufferfish, straining at the limits of his skin until it seemed certain he would explode and splatter. And then Tac went limp—ponderously he fell, first to his knees, then forward to his face, almost lazily, shouldering into death as a man settles into a warm and restful bed.

Gossard stepped into the room, behind Tac. There was a knife in his hand, and the blade steamed with new blood.

Orange is a sprawling, ugly town, situated a few miles west of the historic site of Old Orange, something to the north of what was once Livingston. It is made mostly of wood and fired clay, sunbaked mud, some sections of fine brick and iron put up during the fleeting prosperous decades of the Great Restoration when York was carving an empire out of the checkerboarded squabble of the northeast, before the fortunes of the State began to decline. It contains a large proportion of Utopian buildings, although few are completely standing, and only a very few are in anything resembling usable condition. It is primarily a trading town, serving as a funnel and middleman for the traffic between the Stabilities of Portland, Pitt, and the South, all of the trade that follows the main routes skirting the Wall of the City of God. It also contains what passes today for heavy industry, and is well known for leather tanning and textiles. It is the third largest city in York, and, since the destruction of Worcester, the most eastern of all the really big towns in the Human Domain, south of Portland.

Tonight, it simmered.

Deep in a parched, brutal summer, the city stewed and steamed like sluggish porridge over a flame. Heat poured in from the west, as though tilted from a giant's ladle, filled the city to the brim, and then hardened—like wax, like amber, catching and preserving everything within the fierce dry ocean of itself.

In Orange, all motion had stopped. The life of the city sunk to a torpid minimum, the occasional patient twitching of a toad buried in mud at the bottom of a riverbed, hiding from the sun. People huddled in their shanty homes, stunned by heat, stacked like corpses in the smothering dark. There was no wind. Torches burned without wavering, their smoke stretching straight up, as if they were lines attached to a hook in heaven. Heat swallowed sound like a mountain of feathers, damping it, sopping it up. Even the air itself seemed to have been sucked away, molecule by molecule, and replaced with a clear liquid glass that one could somehow breath without ever quite suffocating completely, but which never afforded any comfort or relief.

To Hanson, sitting on top of an ancient Utopian freight transport crawling through Orange from the Docks toward South Gate, it seemed as if the hush and suspension of the night were aimed at him, as if the whole city were holding its breath in horror at what he had done. Or perhaps the city was gathering that breath for a great shout, a scream, the hush breaking in an instant and boiling with sudden faceless pursuit, the pointed finger, *there* he is, the contaminated one, the fugitive, the killer, *there,* and the horny, impersonal hands pulling him down, pulling him under, rending his bones apart in a single ecstatic explosion of blood . . . Hanson shifted his feet on the deckplates, bracing himself better against the rolling of the massive old machine. There was no pursuit yet. The shabby buildings of the Blackstone district watched him with disinterest, drooping lids of windows, slack-gaped mouths of doors, leaning against each other in weariness and defeat—they had seen too much, known too much, they didn't care about Hanson, or his crime.

The sweltering torpor of Orange suited Hanson's mood tonight—still half-dazed, drained and shaken by the violence of his passion at the factory, unable to keep up with a bewilderingly fast tumble of events. Like a graveyard, silent Orange was both disconcerting and peaceful, radiating an inevitable certainty of death that was oddly comforting. The city might have been an open grave, yawning dumbly at the stars, weighted down with dead but not yet filled in with raw earth. In many ways it was just that—an open grave; always had been, always would be, until the last of its scurvy inhabitants succumbed to disease, hunger, war, murder. And then would someone, Something, come along to kick the dirt down over Man?

They had come up from the Docks without seeing anyone at all—unusual, since the magic, lumbering passage of a Utopian machine was a minor event, and normally the streets would have suddenly swirled with people at their approach, certainly hordes of grimy children, all hoping for a moment's release from the monotony and brutality of their lives. But the killing heat had won out over curiosity, over magic. Industry Hill had been deserted when they skirted around its base, as it had been earlier when Hanson had descended from the factory in the dazed clamor of his own blood. Even the State Inspectors who usually swarmed the Hill to guard against sneak thieves were hiding inside from the weather; but then, so too were the sneak thieves. As they rumbled through the edges of Prospect Terrace, Hanson had seen a drunk pissing contentedly on the fine stone house of a prosperous wool merchant—a harbinger of the slums, and a bellwether of the night: no SIs around to stop him, as he would usually have been intercepted long before reaching the Swank. Now, as they turned downhill toward the center of Blackstone and the Bog, and as the neighborhood crumbled and deteriorated appallingly, he saw people in the streets for the first time: sullen, sluggish crowds who were out on the street because they *lived* there, in the street; because they had nowhere else to go.

Behind him, the State Factory shouldered against darkness, an island of brazen light, a mountain of iron—an open flame flickered red from its top, like a tongue. Lesser industries, lesser buildings, clustered around its massive flanks: attendants to the Lord of Hell. It was a sight he had seen every evening for fifteen years, but now it made him uneasy and afraid, as if the factory were watching him with hungry furnace eyes, as if it would stride monstrously after him on legs made of stone and shadow, a demon cat after a mouse. It would have Oristano's face.

Murderer, he thought, trying it on for size.

In spite of himself, he turned his head every few seconds while they crawled down the slope to the Bog, keeping an eye on the factory until it was swallowed by a jumble of low roofs, as Industry Hill sunk below the outskirts of Blackstone.

Gossard had saved him.

The feral half of Hanson's mind, the killer that had taken control to hunt Oristano, had thought itself clever—dodging the watchmen and State Inspectors, stalking its prey, waiting in ambush. But Tac had been much smarter than Hanson. He had sensed Hanson's anguish and turmoil, figured out what Hanson would do before Hanson himself knew, extrapolated the consequences and decided how best to turn them to his financial advantage; laying an ambush of his own to catch Hanson murdering Oristano. And Gossard had been smarter than Tac. Gossard had seen Tac skulking near the washroom, and had figured the whole tangle out in one intuitive, empathetic flash: what Hanson was doomed to do, what Tac's avarice would drive him to do in response, and what he himself must do to save his friend's life. And he had, setting a counter-ambush to silence Tac before he could betray Hanson.

In the whole web of intrigue, only Hanson had been stupid.

Passion had driven him to a blind crime, poorly conceived, clumsily executed—*stupid*. Only luck had saved him, for the moment, from the consequences of the act. And he was still stupid—now he was *fleeing* stupidly, blindly, stumblingly, with no plan, no purpose, no destination. If not for Gossard, Hanson told himself bitterly, he would probably still be standing in Oristano's office like a heatstruck ox, waiting dumbly for the SIs to come and collect him. It had been Gossard who had gotten him going again, who had jolted him a little out of his daze, who had set the mechanism of escape in motion. It had been Gossard who had locked the doors to Oristano's office from the outside and, leading Hanson by the elbow like a sleepwalker, helped him dodge the watchmen and make his way safely outside the factory. And it was also Gossard who destroyed the fantasy of Hanson concealing his guilt: everyone in the factory knew of the vendetta between Hanson and Oristano, and the moment Oristano was found dead, everyone would know who had killed him. The factory SIs wouldn't even bother to carry out an investigation. They'd know who to arrest.

"Get out of Orange tonight," Gossard had said. "Get as far away as you can before morning, and keep on going. They'll put their hands on you if you're anywhere in the city, but if you skip entirely, go up the country, they won't look for you very far. Oristano wasn't *that* important. But get out quick. And don't tell anybody where you're going—" And he'd looked up at Hanson out of his sick, fat face, more strained and pale than ever with the heat. Hanson had realized, in one of those flashes of intuition that approach prophecy, that Gossard didn't have much longer to live, that his health had deteriorated too far to stand the summer ahead, that Gossard probably knew it, that certainly both of them were aware they'd never see each other again, and found nothing in his vocabulary adequate to that kind of goodbye. So they'd stared at each other for a long, awkward moment until Hanson finally blurted "Come with me," knowing as soon as he said it that Gossard would never desert his family and could never get them safely out of Orange, that Gossard would play out his role till he dropped, knowing what would happen but unable to get off the wheel. Gossard had merely shaken his head, said "Luck," and lumbered back into the factory, shutting the service door behind him, committing Hanson to the night.

With luck, Hanson had until the morning, maybe until noon, to get out of Orange. When Oristano missed tonight's inspection tours, it would be assumed that he had taken too much dope, or drunk too much whisky, and was sleeping it off in his office behind locked doors. It had happened before; nobody would think too much of it, nobody would dare try to wake him up. Probably nobody would begin to wonder until sometime tomorrow. Then they would try to rouse Oristano by knocking, try again, and eventually someone would have the guts to go find a master key and investigate. Maybe noon, maybe not.

And where was he supposed to *go?*

Nowhere on foot, that had been certain. Even dazed, he retained that much logic. The nearest village was Garfield, thirty miles away, and that hardly more than an SI garrison to maintain an old stone bridge over the Passaic. Too far, in one sense, over dangerous ground, alone. Not far *enough,* quick enough, in another sense. It was unlikely they'd bother to search that far afield for him, but if they did, he'd be finished: only one usable road to Garfield, only two roads out of Garfield north, and more than thirty miles to the next village—he could be easily run down by mounted men, who just might check Garfield because it was the obvious place for a fugitive afoot to go. And once he started out on foot, he'd stay on foot. Orange was the only place within a hundred miles where he might be able to find an alternative to walking.

And so he'd gone to the Docks, and his luck had held. There had been four caravans loading up at the land-docks, in spite of the heat and the late hour—the Docks were the deep-beating heart of the city's commerce, of its life, and they never shut down. Three of the caravans were hauled by the clumsy, potbellied steam-tractors, all pig iron and pistons, boisterous and bellowing. The fourth was headed by a sleek Utopian transport, an untarnishable, indefatigable giant of high steel, twelve feet tall by thirty feet long, more than four hundred years old and still running as smoothly and perfectly as an engineer's dream, running continuously for all of those four centuries without need of refueling or repair—magic. It had been built long before the creation of the ancient and venerable Government of the State of York, and it would probably be around long after the State had guttered and died, maybe even after there were any men left in the dwindling world to run her. But now, in the haunted interregnum of Earth, she was captained by Johann Willis and headed north this trip, to the Stabilities of Portland. And Johann Willis was an acquaintance of Hanson's. Not a close friend, but an acquaintance, and an occasional drinking companion—and the uncle of Hanson's dead wife, Hanson's Becky, down and dead in the flinty soil of York for more than four years. That was a blood-bond between them. Maybe it would be enough.

They reached the bottom of the slope and turned right, paralleling the open, ceramic-lined sewage trench that ran down the middle of Canal Street. The transport lurched as the road changed from worn cobblestone to thigh-deep mud, then its massive treads found traction and it steadied—the clumsy steam-tractors sometimes foundered in the rutted morasses that passed for streets in this section of summer Orange, but the ancient transport was nearly unstoppable. It wallowed ponderously along Canal Street, throwing a wake of mud on either side. Dense clouds of mosquitoes and stinging black flies rose up out of the mire at the transport's approach, and settled again, swirling and buzzing angrily, when it had passed. Hanson swore irritably and slapped at his face; almost immediately, he was bitten again, on the back of his hand and then on the neck. Degald, the Mate, grinned at Hanson from his position on the broad spine of the transport—he was wearing a hood of fine-meshed netting, and heavy black leather gloves in spite of the heat. "A bitch, a'n't it?" Degald shouted jovially over the pounding of the engines. "But you gots to get flies, *ai?* The whole place's made out of shit!" The Mate grinned at Hanson again, enormously, revealing a mouth crowded with crooked, broken snaggleteeth. Degald seemed to be having a fine time. And another two flies bit Hanson.

Dispiritedly, Hanson pulled his head as far into his coat as he could, like a turtle. It was, if possible, even hotter here than it had been on the Hill, and the stench alone was almost enough to knock a man down and kill him: offal, carrion, endless middens of hundred-year-old garbage, raw industrial sewage running through the Ditch, rank and sulfurous clouds of chemical smoke drifting downwind from the factories on Industry Hill. This was the center of the Bog, the Valley, the Sink, whichever you wanted to call it—the cancerous, ulcerated underbelly of Orange, the nadir of a city where even the rich had never risen too very far above subsistence. Rickety, narrow buildings lined Canal Street by the hundreds, rearing precariously up on either side of the open sewage trench, the Ditch, like rheumy, arthritic animals who had come down to drink of the foul water before they died. Some of these hovels were nine or ten stories high, and none of them were wider across the base than the width of a single room. They were made of mismatched wooden beams, bricks, paving-stones, all stuck together with clay and mud and mortar any way they would hold—some of them were so unsteady that they had to be propped up with poles braced in the ground, and all of them would sway and totter sickeningly in any kind of a wind. There was seldom even a hairsbreadth of space between one structure and another, and many actually did lean against their neighbors, so that if a building did finally collapse, it usually took two or three others with it. No matter: a horde of homeless people and "contractors" would swarm through the rubble, strip—and sometimes eat—the corpses, and salvage what building materials they could. Within a few weeks, new buildings would have been raised under the brutal direction of the "contractors," cannibalized from the debris of the fallen, and people would be bribing and murdering with total ruthlessness to obtain the privilege of inhabiting them. This had been going on for hundreds of years, and it was doubtful that any building in the Bog had survived intact; they all toppled down into junk and were reassembled out of that same junk, over and over again, like shabby phoenixes. Every decade or so, a fire would rip through the Bog and destroy huge swaths of it, followed inevitably by Plague, a year or two later. But the Bog was indestructible—it would eat a little deeper into Blackstone, transforming the swallowed sections into the Bog; building materials would be found somewhere, somehow, and the hovels would rise again. And soon everything would be just about the same as it had ever been.

This had been my life, Hanson thought numbly, staring into the depths of the leprous warrens. A little bit better, perhaps, but not much. Blackstone instead of the Bog. Malnutrition instead of outright starvation, lingering sickness instead of immediate death. At least a pretense of a roof over his head, although some winters he'd wondered if it could be much colder even out on the street. A difference only in degree, not in kind. That was what he had bought with his youth, with his life. With Becky. And always the underlying threat of the Bog, of a fall into the Bog. Inevitable, waiting for all of them when they could no longer work hard enough to keep themselves out of it. In the end, all roads led downhill to it, to the Bog.

There was a fresh corpse floating in the Ditch, and he watched it bob and swirl with the current until, just before it was too far behind to see, two men with a travois fished it out of the water.

Ahead, the crowds became denser. The transport slowed, slowed again, almost—but not quite—coming to a stop. It inched through the muck, ponderous and irresistible. The crowd parted reluctantly around it—sometimes a man would wait until the giant treads were almost touching him before his courage broke and he foundered out of the way, slipping, falling, rolling. And then he would climb up out of the mud—plastered and stinking with it, rubbing it out of his eyes—and spit at the transport, or shake his fist. Hanson could see mouths moving in the crowd, teeth bared, men grinning with hate; he could hear shouts and obscenities, rising thinly above the sound of the engine. Someone threw a clot of mud that spattered against the deckplates; another. These were the dregs of the Bog: lobos, offenders whom even the casual butcher that was State justice found too unimportant to kill; homeless and unregistered children; junkies; gene-scrambled sports; decrepit whores; the infirm, the aged, the blacklisted—all those who couldn't work, or were not allowed to. They lived like wild dogs, on garbage, on what they could steal, on each other. They slept in the street, on the steps of the shanty homes of the more fortunate poor, in alcoves, under bridges. By the thousands. And every winter they died, by the thousands. And every spring there was another thousand, or two, to replace them—filtering down, no longer able to hold even a place in the middle terrace of Bog society. Their despair was a tangible pressure, black as coal; the heat crushed it into hate, diamond-bright, diamond-hard hate, tight and dangerous, gave it something to work on. There was a solid wall of men a few yards in front of the transport, and they did not look like they were going to move. Some of them were holding knives, some clubs, some torches, and their faces made the flesh crawl around Hanson's stomach and groin. Suppose one of them had a bow, or a javelin, or a scorpion—

Up in the cab, Johann Willis hit the whistle. The giant bellow of it slammed the high building walls on either side of the road and washed back, filling the world. The faces of the crowd went slack, shattered by sound, and then firmed up again when reason returned. But they had been shaken. They clutched their weapons uneasily and blinked around them, as the thunder died in grumbling echoes from the street. Willis hit the whistle again. The crowd was ready for it this time, but they still flinched, and when their faces set themselves up again, a little determination had gone out of them. The whistle blasted twice more. Buffeted, the rickety shanty buildings swayed and trembled, and a board crosswalk connecting two of them was jolted loose: it fell, sending an onlooker who had been lounging on it hurtling twenty feet down into the mud. Incongruously, someone in the crowd laughed. And instantly, as if that was his cue, Degald was on his feet and at the edge of the deck, leaning out, bracing himself against a stanchion. He had pushed the netting back from his face, and his revolver was in his hand. "*Move* your asses!" Degald screamed. "*Move 'em!*" He was grinning ferociously at the crowd; his eyes flickered back and forth, very fast, and the revolver moved with his gaze, so that first one man, then another found himself staring straight into the gun's ugly muzzle. Willis had poked his head up above the three-quarter shield of the cab—he said nothing, but he raised an ancient repeating rifle and slowly brought it down so that it was braced against his left forearm. Degald shouted again. When the crowd did not move, he seemed to be amused. His grin softened into a smile that was even more frightening. "Move, Goddamn you," he said, not at all loudly, almost with affection. "*Move.*" There was something infinitely hard in his voice, riding it like a carrier beam, and the crowd flinched at the sound of it. Hesitantly, they moved—men stepping back, then changing their minds and stepping forward, then stepping back again. Willis caught the ripple of movement; he must have made some imperceptible signal, because the whistle screamed again at that moment, longer and louder than before. At once, the crowd broke. Grudgingly, they flowed aside, like some heavy, sluggish liquid, and let the transport through. Most of them didn't look up as it passed; they studied their feet and slogged wearily away through the mud. Willis ducked back down into the cab. In a moment, the transport was picking up speed once more. Its whistle hooted again and again, scornful in victory.

Degald came walking back along the spine, rolling effortlessly with the motion of the vehicle. He sat down next to Hanson and patted the revolver in its holster. "No sweat," he said, "no problem." He grinned at Hanson. "Sometimes we gots to really *shoot* a couple, when they gets, you know, real stubborn. Mule-headed. They gets real mule-headed, in the hot weather." He spat, casually. "Or just run them right over. *Ai,* that's even better, that works real good. But they *a'ways* move. Eventu'ly. *Oh* yes." And he flipped the netting back down over his face with his thumb, and settled back against another stanchion. He looked very comfortable. He didn't move or speak again for a long while, and he might almost have been asleep. But his eyes glittered through the mesh, and they missed nothing.

Hanson tried several words on his tongue, but none of them worked.

He sat in prudent silence, and swatted blackflies.

In another half hour, the transport had crawled through South Gate, and was beginning to pull clear of Orange. There wasn't too much in the way of suburbs: one or two quarries, a few truck farms, some night-shrouded gypsy trading camps, a large garrison of the standing Army of York—carefully not allowed *inside* the city itself since the last "reorganization"/palace revolution/civil war—a deserted roadside shrine, and then, after a long stretch of nothing, a final SI post commanding a crossroads. No outlying villas, or estates, or summer homes, or middle-class residential areas, as there might have been in another age. It was dangerous to live outside the city walls, and few did, except for the gypsies and free-traders who were themselves too feral to be afraid, and the armed troops who were there to keep marauders away from the city—and the marauders, of course.

And then Orange was gone, completely, and the night closed in black and smothering. The transport's headlight, at medium intensity, pushed the night about fifty yards away in front, but it closed down behind them even more dark and menacing, as if it resented the intrusion of the light. Degald sent the other two crewmen walking down the train to hang lanterns at the couplings, and one at the tail. The transport was pulling a trainload of eight cars this trip, and the lanterns helped the driver judge the position of that long, awkward tail accurately enough to get around curves without jackknifing it. The wood-and-iron freight cars were clumsy, ponderous things, but the transport pulled them easily, and could have pulled four times their number if the poor condition of the roads did not disallow it. To compensate, the cars were built deep and filled to overflowing—their loads barely contained by the tarpaulins lashed down taut over every car—and the cargo hold of the transport itself, under Hanson's feet, was stuffed full of the smallest and most valuable items. In spite of the weight, the transport moved swiftly through the darkness, sure and graceful, and Hanson was once again filled with rueful awe at the skill of the Utopian artisans. It was easy to understand the attitude of people like Relk; indeed, of most people—Hanson knew, intellectually, that the transport was "merely" a product of superior engineering, but it still seemed like magic to him, and he responded to it in that way, emotionally. The gap between those ancient people and himself was too great; so much had been lost and forgotten. . . .

They were running through a stretch of scrub forest that alternated with sand and clay barrens. It was desolate, forlorn country, especially by starlight on a moonless night. They followed a curve around the shoulder of a small hill; there was a light way up the hill, just below the crest, the lit window of a building shrouded by trees. It shone high and lonely, a cold star riding above the Earth, below the sky. Then the road dipped, and it was gone. Hanson realized that he would never know what the building was, or who lived there, or why, or if someone had been at that window, listening to the transport breathe mournfully by in the night, watching the lanterns bob like a string of blurred red jewels, perhaps wondering what eyes rode the train and were looking invisibly back up. The thought made Hanson sad. Life was like that—you rushed by others in the dark without knowing they were there, you left them behind; each minute buried a thousand possibilities, each turning killed a thousand alternate lives, and you had to say farewell constantly to people you would never meet. And still you rushed on. Hanson became aware that Degald was watching him closely, although he could no longer see the Mate's eyes. He forced himself to relax, to sink back down against the deckplates. He was trembling. Nothing then but night and motion, until they pulled abreast of another SI outpost, a big half-timbered building surrounded by a tall earthwork wall, ablaze with torches, Bloomfield Station. A potbellied SI in his shirt-sleeves, a half-eaten chicken drumstick in one hand, stood by the side of the road and waved them on. An embankment ahead, tall and *long,* diagonally across their path. And a ramp.

The transport had been heading east, more or less. Now it flowed up the ramp, turned left, and began to crawl north. This was an ancient highway, unbelievably huge in comparison to modern roads—a half-dozen transports could have traveled it abreast without crowding each other, and it stretched on endlessly ahead, dead black, like a frozen river made out of the night-fabric itself. The transport picked up speed. On such a good surface, Willis was certain to open it all the way up; he would be unable to for seven-eighths of the trip. They rocked and clicked along at a terrifying clip, but even Hanson knew that this was the safest part of the journey. The highway was one of the major arteries—and assets—of the State. It stretched from the southern counties, where it was chopped off sheer by the Wall below Iselin, all the way up to Spring Valley in the north, where it was possible, after a break, to take another old road up to Newburgh and Kingston Center. It'd been cleared of rubble and occasional blockages by a massive project during the Restoration, and now it was zealously guarded by the State—there would be SI garrisons every fifteen or twenty miles along its length.

The whistle hooted once, and Degald went up to relieve the captain. In a moment, Willis came back along the spine, massaging the tension out of his shoulder. He squatted down next to Hanson. He was still carrying the rifle; on caravan, it was chained to his wrist, and it never left him—he even slept with it. It was nearly irreplaceable, and worth more than some of the cargo. That reminded Hanson of Oristano's revolver, wrapped heavily in oilskin and hidden in Hanson's pouch—Gossard's idea; he'd never've had the presence of mind to think of it. Stealing the revolver was alone enough to earn him the death penalty; in fact, it was probably a more serious offense than the killing of Oristano. Thinking that, Hanson smiled. They could only hang him once, after all.

He greeted the captain, and they talked of the trivial things people talk of when something is making them uncomfortable in each other's presence. Imperceptibly, Willis edged the conversation around, and, after a while, Hanson realized that Willis was fishing for more information on why he was leaving Orange. To get the ride, he'd told Willis a compendium of half-truths about being laid off and blacklisted, and that he was leaving, simply, to survive. Willis knew of the enmity between Oristano and Hanson, and the tale was credible enough, except for Hanson's desire to leave Orange *immediately,* with only the clothes on his back. He had explained that away as a desire to avoid possible further prosecution by Oristano—since, as a blacklistee, he was outside the law and anyone could do anything at all to him with perfect impunity from the State—and the fact that he stood a better chance of getting a ride from Willis than from another captain. It was a good story, but Hanson was a poor liar, and Willis was very sharp. Hanson had no way of knowing how much of the story Willis believed, if he believed any of it.

"So what will you do now?" Willis asked. "You have any plans at all?"

"No," Hanson said, "just to get out of Orange, is all. I a'n't got a chance in Hell there. Upcountry, at least maybe I can get some kind of piss-ass job, someway. Don't know what, but I'm a dead man if I stay."

"Ayah," Willis said, "that's true, right enough." He sighed. He was a tall, lanky man, about ten years older than Hanson, with a face like a weathered stone hatchet. His hair was heavily streaked with gray, but he held his squatting position effortlessly, rocking slightly heel-to-toe to balance against the motion of the transport. He turned his head and stared steadily at Hanson. He had an intricate, compassionate face, but it was a grim one nevertheless—there was something unshakable in it, as cold and hard as flint. It was a face of a man accustomed to command and in the habit of depending on no one or nothing other than himself. "That's true," he repeated musingly. He shrugged, and ponderously aimed his face away from Hanson, as if it was very heavy and moved on hinges. But his eyes flicked back again. His eyes were a restless, glittering black, like those of a magpie or an ancient crow. They would fix on something, absorb it completely, flick to something else. "What was it you said you got canned for?" he asked.

"Didn't say," Hanson said. Then he told him, making it up as he went along. He wasn't very good at this sort of thing, and he had the feeling that he was floundering in deeper and deeper. Probably he had contradicted himself a half-dozen times already; it was hard to remember what he'd said even a moment ago. He was numb and confused and deeply sad, and that desperate, hysterical depression was building up again—he could feel it crying and yammering inside his belly, like a little trapped animal. He finished his story and sat resignedly, waiting to see if Willis was going to challenge him on it.

"Ayah," Willis said at last, "a bad thing." His eyes flicked away from Hanson, flicked back, flicked away. "A shame and a Goddamned waste," he said. "Piss your life away—" He stopped, sighed, scratched his ear with his finger, sighed again. After a long pause he said, "Making good time tonight."

"Ai," Hanson said.

"Ayah," Willis said.

They fell silent.

Another caravan was coming down the highway toward them, probably headed south to Orange. This one was hauled by one of the clumsy steam-tractors, puffing and clattering horrendously, belching fire-shot clouds of black smoke, its great pistons thudding back and forth. It sounded like a giant's sackful of pots and plates being dragged across rocky ground. The two big vehicles hooted at each other as they passed. The sound rolled wistfully around the low hills until it was blotted up by the thick pine woods. Willis shifted position restlessly. He ran a hand up through his graying hair, brought it down to tug at his earlobe, but didn't say anything after all. Hanson was aware that Willis was wrestling with some complex emotion, but there was no way to tell exactly what it was. They sat silently while the transport clicked up a slight rise. To the west, the country opened out into extensive piney woods, but to the east, Hanson knew, there was nothing but five or six miles of low, weed-overgrown rubble, the tangled ruins of broken Utopian buildings, inhabited only by coyotes, chimeras—sports too gene-scrambled even to be regarded as human—and abandoned children who had grown up completely feral. Even the bandits preferred to camp in the woods, usually. It was safer there, in spite of the wolves and the killercatchers.

Then they topped the rise, and they could see the Wall itself, immense, smoldering with pinks and coral-reds, burning without flame: the Wall of the City of God. Running roughly parallel with the highway here, only five miles away, it looked almost close enough to touch. But your hand would burn, Hanson thought. It would surely burn.

"Lookit that, now," Willis said.

"Ai," Hanson said, mistaking the emotion in Willis's voice. His own heart had thudded painfully at first sight of it, and his breath had sucked in, in spite of himself. "It's very beautiful."

Willis turned to look at Hanson. His eyes had slitted up and somehow, subtly, he seemed to be crouching now, where before he had been merely squatting. He stared long and intently at Hanson. Then he made a small disgusted sound in his throat and turned back to look at the Wall. His eyes had widened, and the radiance of the Wall was reflected in them in tiny burning highlights. When he spoke again, his voice was flat and hard. "I hate it," he said. And he spat, emphatically, in the direction of the Wall. And he got up and walked back to the cab, without another word.

Hanson sat up awhile, trying to puzzle it out. But exhaustion, long-denied, rolled over him like a mountain coming down, and he tied himself to a stanchion with his belt, and he went to sleep.

He awoke briefly as they were crossing the Passaic, and he realized that the sound of the whistle signaling to the SI garrison had been wailing through his dreams. He had pictured it as the cry of a huge black bird, wings wide, falling blind through the encrusted and ornamental air. Then his head lolled, and he slept.

He woke again, later, surrounded by motion and blackness. The Wall still blazed across the world, burning its image into the jelly of his retinas. He closed his eyes against the light.

And opened them again at dawn. They were in the process of crossing the Hudson, at Montgomerytown, where a bridge had survived enough intact to be capable of repair by the artisans of the Great Restoration. The Wall was no longer visible, though afterimages of it seemed to smolder in Hanson's still sleep-fogged mind. It had begun its great slow curve east of north, crossing the Hudson below Ossining—cutting straight across the water, the river disappearing under the Wall and out of the knowledge of men. Some said that the river met the sea at last, behind the Wall, inside the City of God. But no one Hanson knew had ever seen the ocean—with the possible exception of Willis—and it was a thing as impossible to picture as the City itself. Occasionally a fishing-boat or a canoe would be swept under the Wall by the current, but the crews never returned, and the river kept its secret.

Here the Hudson ran swift and fierce, as if impatient for its translation into the realms of the Divine, at Ossining. It was a wet, chilly morning. A breeze skimmed silver mists from the broad, gunmetal surface of the river; they boiled up around the black iron of the bridge, and swirled off into the lightening upper air. The sun was just climbing over a forest ridge to the east, sending broad fans of smoky light slantwise through the mist, striking bright highlights from the oily, turbulent water. The span boomed hollow under the transport, buzzed, boomed, buzzed. They were in the middle of the bridge, with everything gray and raw blue and silver-orange, the sky opening into hot gold east, night dying away to the west, the river rolling a humped shoulder below. Hanson felt something move inside, something slip, like a landslide in his head; he was leaving everything he'd ever known, everyone he'd ever known, behind. Then up the steep, thick-wooded slope of the opposite bank, and time for one last look back at the Hudson as it wound toward Ossining, back over all the lands stretching away toward Orange, where he had kept his life. Beaded with cold dew and slapped by raw morning wind, Hanson wondered if he felt regret or relief. And could not decide. And the river sank away behind, and was gone.

Early that evening, the transport rolled to a stop in a nondescript clearing in the woods. There was a pile of rubble in one corner that maybe used to be a house, and, among the weeds, a blistered tangle of Utopian machinery, made of an alloy so complexly specific to its task that it had no value even to the scavengers that ranged out from the cities and smallest towns of York like starveling dogs in search of something, anything, that would keep their worthless lives going yet another day. It had memory, down to the molecular level; you could melt it down and pour it into ingots, but, cooling, it would re-form itself into its original shape.

Much like a man's life, Hanson thought—you could melt it down in the fire, change it completely, but old habits and old ways of thought would reform it again in the same pattern somewhere else. Once a loser, always a loser. Once a fool, always a fool.

Hanson took advantage of the stop to hop down off the deckplates and make his way into the musky-smelling stand of staghorn sumac by the rubble-midden to take a leak. His piss steamed in the cold evening air, and tiny clodhoppers rose to the surface of the ground to soak in it, preening, pirouetting with evident pleasure and spreading their miniature fans wide. Willis had disappeared around the back of the transport, and Degald stayed with the cab, face set into bored immobility.

Willis's irascible voice sounded. "Hanson! Git on back here!"

"A'right. Coming!" Hanson shook free the last drop of pee, buttoned his trousers, and trudged around to the back of the transport.

Willis raised the rifle and pointed it right at his gut.

A kind of sizzle passed through Hanson, a cold and stinging surge of fear. As quietly as he could, he said, "What's this about?"

"You *know* what it's about." Willis held the rifle steady, no posturing, and no way he could miss at this distance, a man to whom the gun held no glamour but was just another tool to be used with a minimum of waste-motion and fuss.

"Listen," Hanson said, and then lapsed into silence. What could he possibly say? That numb despair and resignation were seeping back in, soaking into his bones the way his piss had soaked into the black dirt and the preening hoppers, making it impossible for him to speak. He knew that he should plead for his life, but he couldn't summon the energy to do it. He should have known that he could never get away, never get free of the morass of Orange and the mess he'd made of his life. He should have known that everything would catch up to him, that the world would reach out and crush him as casually as he would crush a bug. He *had* known that, in fact, known it with a fatalism that was deeply ingrained in the marrow of his bones. He'd fooled himself into forgetting it for a moment, into letting himself feel a moment of relief and hope, and now the retribution when it came, when Willis squeezed the trigger of the rifle and the bullet ripped his body apart, would be even more bitter and black by comparison. His luck had never been good; he'd allowed himself to think for a while that it was turning, but now, as he should have known it would, it had run out entirely instead. He cursed himself for the hundred opportunities he'd let go by to slip over the side of the transport and disappear into the wilderness between towns, where he might have carved out a living of some sort for himself. He had a gun, there were brigands he could join. . . . But now it was too late. Maybe it always had been too late.

After all, what did it really matter? If Willis didn't kill him now, sooner or later the Crab in his belly *would*.

They stared at each other over the sights of Willis's rifle. A wind came up and swirled dust around Hanson's feet.

For what seemed like a very long time, neither man spoke.

At last, Willis nodded to the side. Hanson's knapsack sat there, in the shadow of the transport, old and frayed, pathetically small. "You're family," Willis said, "of sorts. Blood's thicker'n water, they say. Can't bring myself to kill you. But I won't let myself be used neither."

Hanson nodded, said nothing. The moment of crisis wasn't over; he knew that there was still time for Willis to change his mind.

"A man like you," Willis said. "A man like you—" Instead of finishing the thought, he noisily cleared his throat and spat a great gob of phlegm to the side. Then, raising his voice, he shouted, "Degald! Get off yer thumb and let's get out of here!"

As Willis strode off, Hanson noticed for the first time that he had a slight limp, a stiffness in one leg that caused him to pull up slightly at the top of each stride. Willis was getting old, too. They all were getting old. To match the world, which was itself old, old and worn-out and weary, grown gray with the dust of millions of generations of lives and stained black with the residue of innumerable sins.

Hanson stood there for a long time, staring at the train pulling away until it had dwindled to a distant string of moving red jewels, and then, after it had vanished completely, at the empty road itself, a gray streak through blackness.

The night gathered around him. Crows exploded up out of the trees on the crest of a distant hill, startled by some noise in the forest, wheeling against the darkening sky and crying out harshly as they flew in some guttural language he could not understand, finally settling back down into the treetops again. Then there was only silence, broken occasionally by the soughing of the wind through the trees, and by the distant and plaintive chime-like sobbing of some unknown creature far away among the trees in the dark.

At last, when he could stand the quiet and the black eventlessness no longer, he stooped to pick up his knapsack. The gun was still there, wrapped in his second pair of trousers. He stuck it in his belt.

There was a trail, hardly more than a deer run, that ran through the clearing here at right angles to the road, and briefly he vacillated between the two directions it proffered him. Then, because it hardly mattered, he chose one at random, and started walking.

The sun had gone out of the sky entirely now, the last orange cloud of sunset guttering from red to purple-gray to sullen black, and only the soft light from the Wall suffused the wood, flushing it with an unearthly coral glow that cast strange iridescent shadows with blood-red edges. Hanson had been traveling for hours, following the trail through the rubble of Utopian ruins, imperishable foundations filled with waters rust-red and turquoise-blue from chemical poisons leached out of the surrounding soil, and the occasional rotting and incomprehensible machine, the remnants of a centuries-long Retreat from the bright dwellings of the Utopians. He pushed his way through woods spotted with feral ornamentals and fruit trees that over the ages had drifted away from their original functions and now produced fruit indigestible to human stomachs . . . or that perhaps had been designed in the first place to feed unknown and long-vanished races, strange and inhuman races that had been so thoroughly forgotten that neither their names nor even the memory of their presence had survived, save only for the trees. In all this time, he had seen nobody and arrived nowhere, but only walked, unthinking, like an automaton.

Then he saw the glint of firelight up ahead.

He stopped. Whoever or whatever was before him, it was probably best to avoid them altogether. Only outlaws, bandits, or worse, would be out in these unwholesome ruins. Honest men would have no reason to be here.

Thinking this, he could almost have laughed. He had nothing in common with honest men anymore. He was an outlaw himself now, cast out from human company like a manshogger or pariah dog.

In the darkness, somebody coughed.

Hanson stiffened in astonishment. The cough had been quiet and deliberate, a noise he was *meant* to hear. There was a lookout guarding the path, unseen, and he had just been warned that if he tried to turn away now, he was as good as dead. No help for it, he had to go forward, follow the light to its source, seek common cause with whatever human refuse clustered about its warmth. He belonged there now, after all, didn't he?

Pushing through a stand of bamboo, he entered a clearing. Dark forms hunkered about the campfire, as stolidly motionless as so many apes. They looked up incuriously at his approach, firelight flickering in their eyes. There were at least a dozen of them, perhaps as many as fifteen or sixteen; the half-light, guttering and then flaring again sporadically, made it hard to tell exactly. The pale, near-human corpse of a thant, spitted on a stick, was roasting over the fire. The peculiar stench of the roasting meat filled the clearing, thick and pungent and strange, hovering uneasily somewhere between appetizing and nauseating.

With a swagger he did not feel, Hanson strode into the light, ostentatiously loosening the gun in his belt, making sure they all got a good look. Paradoxically, the bright fire gathered darkness about itself, blinding him, making him perfectly vulnerable. He cleared his throat. "Who's boss here?"

For a long moment, nobody moved. It was as if he had asked a deeper and more profound question than they were prepared to address, as if he'd challenged them to count the stars in the sky or riddle him the meaning of human pain or draw a street map of the City of God.

He was sweating now; the fire seemed to roar up inside of him. He kept one hand firm on the butt of the revolver, though it was really useless here—easiest thing in the world to come up from behind and brain him with a rock if that's what they had a mind to do. The gun, the fabulously valuable gun, only made him so much less secure, for it gave them something to gain from his death.

Under the pervasive wood smoke and the unsettling odor of the roasting thant, he could smell where they went to shit, not bothering even to put a good distance between themselves and their leavings, and this told him a great deal about the sort of men they were. Careless men. Irresponsible men. He felt a gut-deep disapproval of the lot of them. Even outlaws—no, make that *especially* outlaws—needed discipline.

But they were dangerous nonetheless, perhaps even more dangerous for that very lack of discipline.

A frighteningly ordinary-looking man stood up. "Name's Mahoney." He looked a little to either side, as a man with dogs might, if he were not perfectly secure in his control of his hounds. "Ye're a far way from home."

"Ayah." As nonchalantly as he could, Hanson said, "Looking for someone to hook up with."

Mahoney considered the gun, looked at the imposing size and bulk of Hanson, and drew the obvious conclusions. "Ever kill a man?"

Hanson nodded slowly. "I guess." The words hung heavy before him. It was the first time he had admitted his terrible crime aloud.

Mahoney twisted his hand strangely and a knife appeared in it. He walked toward and then past Hanson, to the remains of the thant charring over the fire, and sliced off a slab.

"Go back to your post," he said to the still-unseen man behind Hanson. Then he thrust the meat into Hanson's hands. "Eat."

So it was, with a one-word command and a mouthful of meat so repugnant that he barely managed to force it down, that Hanson joined the band of outlaws. He was ravenous, but after that first bite, he quietly set the meat aside. He had proved his obedience. Maybe tomorrow there'd be something more wholesome to eat. And if not—well, he'd see.

Suddenly, a little man leaped up on top of a log to the smoky side of the campfire. The firelight leaped and jumped on his sunken features, and he worked his loose and toothless mouth for a bit before he spoke. "Praise God!" he cried. Then, lowering his voice so that he was speaking almost confidentially, "We are all of us insane. And yet, it is not our fault!"

With good-natured disdain, the outlaws turned to look at him.

"We can't help it. It's the Wall's fault. Its existence forces us to acknowledge that our reality is out of phase with our desires. But we cannot admit this. We *cannot*. So, in denying it, we go mad. This is called cognitive dissonance."

Sitting on the log beside him, Mahoney grinned wolfishly. "The Preacher's in one of his moods. This oughta be good."

"Angels used to walk the Earth, indistinguishable among men. They could pass through the Wall at will, because they had subjugated themselves to the will of Heaven. And, if angels could do so, then why not you and I?"

"Tell it, Preach," one of the men said sardonically.

Encouraged, the little man waved his arms. He spoke feverishly, with a passionate intensity. "Man and Heaven must be reconciled. Once I was a great man, a worldly man, learned in all the things that did not matter. I spent my days among the archives of Harrisburg. Until finally I realized that Reconciliation was my destiny, and began the search for the key." He looked around to either side. "And I *found* it!" he said triumphantly. "I found the key to Heaven, and I hold it within me. Right in here!" He slapped his chest enthusiastically. "It's wrapped around my heart, dearer than life, closer than breath, and it will open the—" He faltered and paused. "Open the—" His voice trailed off, and he looked around vaguely. "What was I about to—?"

One of the men pursed his lips and made a lewd sucking noise. The others laughed uproariously. The light of fanaticism went out of the little man, his face collapsing into pathos and misery, body slumping like a balloon with a slow leak.

Hanson felt sickened. There was only one reason such a group of men would tolerate this broken creature. Worse, to survive here, to gain their acceptance, to be recognized as one of their kind, a man who didn't set himself above his fellows, he would have to avail himself of the Preacher's services as well. And he didn't think he could. There were limits, there had to be limits, to what a man would do to survive. Let it pass, he told himself, nobody's expecting you to do anything tonight, no sense borrowing trouble.

Not much more was said that evening. A joke or two, the purport of which was beyond Hanson's comprehension, some lifeless verbal scuffling between two men whose hatred for each other aroused no passion, and some quiet, inconsequential talk about a planned raid on an outlying farmhouse—Hanson got the impression that the ambitions of these men did not extend very far. They were as good as dead already, and most likely knew it. Thinking about things would only make them worse.

Mahoney leaned close and spoke into his ear. "Tomorrow," he said quietly, "I'll need you to take care of a little problem for me." Drawing back, he gave Hanson a sharp look to make sure he understood.

"A'right," Hanson said. Maintaining an outward calm, though his heart was pounding like a jack-hammer. He understood well enough. He had just agreed to kill a man, and he didn't even know *who*.

Mahoney blew his breath out noisily. "That's a'right then." He stood briskly, and slapped Hanson on the back. "We sleep in the ruins. Pick yourself out a spot."

He disappeared into the darkness. Several of the others were already gone.

So they had not even bothered to build themselves shelters. Somehow Hanson was not surprised. He scouted out a flat spot in the angle of two ancient walls, and laid out his blanket preparatory to sleep.

The Preacher came stumbling around the corner, stopped, and stood blinking and bewildered. "This is—" he began. "I was—that is, I was sleeping here and I, I—" His mouth opened and closed, gulping against tears.

Disgusted with the little monkey-faced creature, Hanson gathered up his blanket. "Oh, hell," he grumbled. "Take it, if y'want it. I'll find another spot." He left, sickened by the pathetically grateful expression that flooded the Preacher's face, the moist and worshipful look that came into his eyes.

Hanson was caught in an endless, looping dream when the raid began. He was on the transport again, rolling up and down to the rhythm of life on the roads. It was a long, easy rhythm; it lent itself to a watchful contemplation that was an edge away from sleep, and yet was almost preternaturally alert. There was nothing to mark it but the passage of the sun, rolling up across the arch of sky, under the horizon, up again, and the roads themselves, slipping endlessly under the transport, sometimes paved, sometimes mud, sometimes sun-baked and dusty, the trees along the roadside white with the dust kicked up by the transport, as if they had been hit by a blizzard in the midst of summer. The heat would be rising in waves from the deckplates, shimmering vision. The sky would be dazzlingly blue, and the sun a hot copper penny in it, except when the dust-trail would shift and swirl around the transport itself, and then the sky would become dirty white, and the masked sun would become a smoldering bloodshot eye. Always the endless moving ribbon of the road sliding smoothly toward them, being swallowed by the prow of the transport, with new road always coming into being ahead of them, around the next curve or over the next hill, sliding forward to be swallowed in its turn. And occasionally a hamlet or a village, borne up by the current of the road, bobbing nearby for an instant, and then whirled away behind, like a drowsy, peasant-infested, cow-carrying chip of driftwood. He would become aware that he had dreamed this before and then immediately lose all assurance that this was so. So he would anxiously re-live the non-events of traveling the roads, the muted waterfall thunder of the engine, the constant swaying of the transport and the relentless thudding of the treads, the trees, the road, the villages, Willis's grunted orders, Degald's sudden and pointless laughter. Until he forgot what he was worrying about and it all began again.

He awoke to explosions.

Men were shouting, screaming, running. A bullet splintered bark from a tree not five yards from him, and there were bright lights and dark shapes beyond the dying embers of the campfire, down the path up which he had come. Savage shouts echoed through the ruins, and another bullet sizzled through the air.

In a panicked instant, Hanson was on his feet, quivering and frozen motionless, like a jack-lighted deer. Somebody slammed into him, cursed, and was gone, along with Hanson's paralysis. He grabbed at his shirt to keep from losing the gun, which he'd carefully stuck between undershirt and belt before turning in. It did not occur to him to use it.

Stumblingly at first, and then faster, he began to run. Men were shouting and crashing into things, running ahead of him, up the path. He followed blindly. Somebody grabbed his arm and he lashed out without looking, his fist smashing into a face. But whoever it was did not let go, but wrapped both arms around his waist.

Turning, he stared down into the Preacher's fearful face.

"Don't!" the Preacher gasped. "For God's sake, don't! That's just what they *want* you to do. They're just beaters. The SIs will be up the trail, waiting. I've seen it before! And politicians—it's a sport to them, ambushing rievers, they get to notch bandits without any risk to themselves. Sometimes they take souvenirs."

The old man's unexpected lucidity broke through the haze of fear and instinct. Hanson stopped and looked around. A flare screamed high into the night. Bright lights, harsh shadows. "What should we do?"

"We've got to get away from the path," the Preacher said. "This way." Tugging at Hanson's arm, he half-pulled him over a pile of crumbling bricks and between two ruined walls. Awkwardly, Hanson let himself be led. Behind them, two SIs stooped over a fallen bandit, machetes in hand, hacking wildly, the blades flashing in the smoky light from the Wall as they rose and fell, rose and fell. One SI looked up, and, seeing them, shouted.

They struggled deeper into the darkness.

Together he and the Preacher forced their way through a nightmare of noise-filled woods, stumbling over low walls, ducking under loops of vampire weed and blundering into tangles of mile-a-minute vines, flinching every time a bullet pierced the air with its shrill whine or a phased sonics cannon blanketed the area with an awful split-second of unbearable silence. There was nothing but fear and confusion in Hanson's mind. He'd left his knapsack behind. He had nothing now but his gun and the clothes on his back.

Then the Preacher fell and did not get up.

"Stand, damn you!" Hanson seized the Preacher's shoulder to give him an impatient shake, but his hand came away wet and sticky. He looked at it wonderingly.

Blood.

He stared down at the wrinkled old man, saw the grayness in his bruised face, how the clothes down one side of his body were black with blood. He'd been wounded all along, kept going by hysteria and fear. A flare went up in the air, and doubled shadows from it and the Wall danced in all directions. The little man wasn't going to make it. It was a miracle he'd lasted this long. Hanson couldn't take him along, wherever he was going—it would be useless. The Preacher needed a doctor, and Hanson had no doctoring in him; he could splint a leg or tie a tourniquet, and had several times, back at the factory, but that was it—the kind of gunshot wound the Preacher had was far beyond him. Best to keep moving and let the Preacher fend for himself as best he could, live or die as the gods willed. There was no time now for *sentiment*. . . .

Cursing himself for a fool even as he did it, Hanson bent down and scooped the little man up in his arms. He was surprisingly heavy.

"They killed an angel in Harrisburg," the Preacher said suddenly. He did not open his eyes. "It's in the records—not that anybody but me ever bothered to read the records. . . . Used to do that a lot, back then, the angels. Angels passing through the Wall. . . ."

"Don't talk," Hanson said. He started walking, too tired, too burdened, to run any more. If the SIs caught him, they caught him. It was hard even to care.

But the Preacher went on, unheeding. "So close . . . I came so very *close*. I was not an inconsequential man . . . but I was afraid. Couldn't take those final steps. I had the key to Heaven in me, and I couldn't *go*." He started to weep. "At night, I hear its voice, calling, calling . . . it's never *still*. I'm going to die, aren't I?"

Embarrassed, Hanson repeated, "Don't talk."

"Take me to the Wall," the Preacher said, with surprising force. "I want to get that far at least. Bury me there. So I can say I went the distance."

"Yah, sure." Hanson's step was slowing, and the weight of the body in his arms seemed heavy beyond endurance. He didn't think he could go much further. The night, so full of noise for the duration of their flight, now sank back down into silence, either because of distance or because the SIs and their political masters had finished having their fun and departed.

They came upon an overgrown Utopian road over which meandered a narrow trail, probably not even human-made but rather something created by coyotes or wyverns or thants as they wandered in their dream-sunk and instinctual rounds, and Hanson decided that it could not possibly be the same as the one that passed through the bandit camp. At any rate, safe or not, he was tired of fighting his way through the brush. The woods were preternaturally silent, not so much as a cricket or a knacker stirring. The only sound came from the Wall, a soft humming and buzzing, like an infinite swarm of bees heard from a million miles away.

Abruptly, the Preacher gave a shudder and went still in his arms. With a cold seizure of the heart, Hanson knew that he was dead. He stared down at the man, so small, so light, and, as he stared, a metal rod burst out of the Preacher's chest, passing through skin and muscle and cloth as if they did not exist, gleaming, quicksilver fast. It bent, unfolded several joints, and then plunged into Hanson.

With a cry of horror, he stumbled back, slapping wildly at his chest with both hands, letting the Preacher's corpse fall to the ground. The rod had already disappeared into him as completely as if it had never been there, sinking out of sight within his chest, leaving no trace of its existence behind.

It was gone.

Hanson was tempted to dismiss the incident, the bizarre *thing* that had leaped out at him like some monstrous Jack-In-The-Box and then plunged *into* his body as easily as a hot knife going through butter, dismiss it as a hallucination brought on by fear and fatigue. There had been no pain, after all, and no blood. But he could *feel* it inside him, a heavy weight in his chest that shifted his center of balance and altered his movements in subtle ways. He felt a different man with it in him, estranged from his own body, an exile sitting within the control-cab of his skull, staring horrified and dispassionate out of the eye-sockets. Worse, he could feel the device's desires like a burden of guilt or regret gnawing at the back of his mind. It was anxious to go home, and told him so not in words but in a cold mechanical yearning so intense he felt naked and near-helpless before it.

He stood shivering for a long moment, then bent and picked the Preacher back up again.

The Wall was not far distant, a hundred yards or half a mile, he could not tell. But not far. All the woods around him blazed with its preternatural glow. He walked toward it, impelled by the horror behind him, by the burden in his arms, and by the alien machinery now wrapped around his heart. He could not help himself.

Up close, only a few steps away, closer than he'd ever heard of anyone coming to it, the Wall refused to resolve itself into solid substance. Little flickering motes of intense reddish-pink light swirled and crawled over each other, and the humming sound, though no louder than before, passed right through him; his entire body buzzed and vibrated like the sounding board of a guitar. The Wall loomed so high now that when he craned his head, it seemed to fill the universe, and he had the vertiginous sensation of falling into it. The thing in his chest seemed to leap up with joy.

I won't, he thought wildly. I refuse! But he kept walking. The Wall filled his sight entirely, that terrible, unearthly dazzle. Briefly, he tried to lie to himself, to pretend that he was just going to bring the Preacher to the Wall he had spent his entire life journeying toward without ever reaching, and place his body there before it, like an offering to an angry God, so that He might be moved to pity and forgive His sinning children, especially that one in particular who was named Hanson. But being so close to the Wall seemed to lend the bizarre object within him strength; the buzzing rose up and overwhelmed Hanson's thoughts in a great wave.

A hole opened in the Wall like a mouth, directly before him. It was big enough for a man to walk into. No, he thought. *No!*

He walked in.

The Wall closed behind him. He was in a moving bubble that kept pace with him. The walls provided enough light for him to see by and enough air to breathe. But it was warm, much warmer than the air outside had been. Sweat beaded up on his forehead, ran in rivulets from his armpits. It was ungodly *hot* in here! He kept walking, but more slowly now. His arms ached dreadfully, and his knees were starting to buckle. He cursed his weakness, hefted the Preacher's body, and forced himself forward.

He kept walking straight ahead, until he was sure he should have passed through by now. How thick *was* the Wall, anyway? How thick could it possibly *be?* The swarming buzz of microscopic bees made it hard for him to think.

On an impulse, he turned and walked at right angles to his previous path. The bubble tracked him perfectly. So it wasn't guiding him! He returned, as best he could, to his previous path. But he was definitely lost now, somewhere within the reaches of the Wall, and it was growing hotter. His skull buzzed and stuttered, and his breath came in long, shuddering gasps. It was as hot as the inside of an oven. He was surprised that his hair hadn't caught fire.

The Preacher's body grew heavier and heavier. Hanson's steps faltered, grew slower and slower, as though he were wading through mud. Finally, he stopped, and, groaning, sank to his knees in despair. The buzzing grew louder. He reached out a hand, and where his palm brushed against the glowing substance of the Wall, it suddenly stung like a thousand wasps. He whipped his hand back, and saw that it was all bloody, skin and flesh sliced away where he had brushed it against the Wall. Ignoring the pain, he extended the arm again, gingerly, index finger extended.

As he'd suspected, the second time he didn't have to reach so far. The bubble was closing about him. There must be something he could do to stop its progress, but with the heat and noise increasing unbearably, he could not think what it was. He could not think. He could only sink down over the Preacher's corpse, grateful that his ordeal was almost over, as the bubble dwindled around him and its molten substance wrapped itself about his skin in sudden and searing pain, terrible in its intensity.

Hanson screamed.

He awoke in daylight, lying on his back in a meadow, shaded by an elm tree bearing vivid orange fruit. A gentle breeze touched him. It carried the mingled scents of sandalwood and wintergreen.

A tall, inhumanly thin man in a charcoal grey tunic stood watching over Hanson. He had a kind face. On seeing Hanson awake, he smiled. "Welcome home," he said.

Home? Hanson rolled over and levered himself up on an elbow, and then rose to his feet. He looked around him, and knew for a certainty that he had passed all the way through the Wall.

Heaven was not as he'd imagined it.

No, that was wrong. Hanson had never been able to imagine *what* Heaven might actually be like. Oh, when he was young, he'd been as free with a crudely ribald speculation as anyone, but as far as what it might be *like* to actually stand in the City of God—

Whatever it was, it wasn't this.

He looked across a vast lawn freckled with occasional pairs of silver dots or circles—gently rolling land that stretched as far as the eye could see, and all well-manicured, trimmed, as if someone were mad enough to mow it all. Not that any man could. It would've taken a hundred mowers, in constant motion, tireless, insanely devoted to their task. . . . He shook his head. There were—*buildings?*—here and there, isolated from each other, immaculate and pointless. A cone larger than any single structure Hanson had ever seen, delicately balanced on its point and canted to one side. A red glass sphere caught in arches of congealed lightning. What could only be a baby's arm magnified a million times, sticking out of the earth, fingers gently moving in a way that was undeniably alive.

It did not look right. Hanson knew there was some *other* way that Heaven should look, though he lacked the ability to put it into words. More beautiful, somehow. More symmetrical, perhaps. It should be bizarre and wonderful and, yes, strange, certainly strange. But not like *this*. Never like this. He turned back to the thin man, who was still waiting patiently on him. "Are you . . . an angel?"

An urbane, undeniably sympathetic, and self-dismissive gesture. "I am a function. You have been in the lands of the Renunciates for so long a time that you can no longer recall your origins. Until you recover your memory, you may call upon my services as your interface and guide."

"My memory," Hanson said flatly. He could make sense of none of this.

"Your friend is anxious to see you." He cast his mind back, awkwardly groping for meaning. Anyone who could have been counted a friend of his, by however loose a reckoning, was either long dead or left behind in Orange; he had no friends anymore, not unless you counted the Preacher, and he—"My friend is dead."

"Not any longer."

The Preacher sat in the grass of a nearby hollow, running a finger around and around the inside of his mouth, admiring his perfect new teeth. He smiled broadly at Hanson. "Quite a set of choppers, eh?" Then, indicating the thin man, "Don't pay any mind to Cicero. He's not real."

"He said he was a function."

"It means the same thing. I told him to let you sleep, figured you could use it. Me, I've been up for hours. How do you feel?"

"Fine," Hanson said uncomfortably. He slapped his hands together, and then, as he realized what he'd done, raised them up to his face in wonderment: The places on the palm and the tip of the one finger that the Wall had eaten away had been completely, magically healed. And, now that he thought about it, he really *did*, he felt just fine! A hundred small aches and aggravations were gone, from the sour tooth that had nagged dimly from the back corner of his mouth for as long as he could remember to the thorn scratches and sticker-rashes he'd incurred blundering into the mile-a-minute vines last night—gone, as if they had never been. He rotated his neck, and it didn't make the little crackling noises that he had grown accustomed to. The constant dull pain in his stomach was gone, too, and he placed his hand flat on his belly, in wonder, as a wild surmise struck him—perhaps they had taken the Crab out of him, too, cured his cancer as casually as they had given the Preacher new teeth. Why not? If the one was possible, perhaps the other one was too. Certainly he didn't feel the least bit sick anymore. In fact, he felt better, physically, than he ever had in his life.

Something opened like a wound inside him, an emotion so alien to him for so many years that he almost didn't recognize it.

Hope.

"By God," he breathed. "By *God*, Preacher, I—"

"Boone!" the little man snapped. "My name is J. Pickett Boone, and don't you forget it!"

Startled, Hanson looked hard at him. There was a clear light in Boone's eyes; the mental confusion of earlier was gone. He held himself like a supervisor now. Not only his body had been healed by his passage into Heaven, it seemed, but his mind as well. And with his new-found clarity of thought must surely have come memories of his association with the outlaw band, and humiliation about the services he had provided them in his long evasion of the Wall. Boone was glaring up at him with a fierce intensity, fists clenched, trembling, like a terrier-dog working itself up to attack a bull. Hanson found that he despised Boone less than before, and, paradoxically, disliked him more.

He dropped his eyes. "Didn't mean anything by it," he mumbled.

For a long, still moment, Boone's face remained closed, tight, hostile. Then he made a curt, dismissive gesture. The balance of power between them had shifted, subtly but surely; immediately, Hanson regretted having let the moment slide by the way he had. But it was too late, no use trying to put the egg back into the shell, what was done was done. The little man stood and stretched and looked searchingly about him, staring into the middle distance where the grassland rose in great arched ribs, under which birds flew and atop which were trees and grazing deer, and beyond, at the ranges of what were either strange mountains or even stranger buildings. Boone looked upon the bizarre structures of Heaven with shrewd, knowledgeable eyes; they clearly did not seem strange to *him*. . . .

Cicero stood nearby with that blank, alert look of his. Hanson felt oddly reluctant to address his questions to him. Lowering his voice, he said, "Boone, I can't make any sense out of—" he swept a hand to take in everything, the buildings he could make a partial sense of one at a time but could not assemble into a single coherent picture, could not seem to hold in his mind all at the same time—"all this."

"Are you a religious man?" Boone asked.

The question took him aback, it had been so long a time since anybody had asked him anything remotely like it. Religion was not the sort of thing a man like him was expected to have an opinion on. "I don't think so."

"Then maybe there's some slight chance of your understanding." The little man spoke in a fussy, professorial manner, falling back to the rhythms and cadences of his long-forgotten former life. "Hanson, the City of God isn't any such thing. Got that? It's not inhabited by gods or angels or anything of the sort, but by people. People like you and me."

"Uh . . ."

"Did you ever try to imagine what it was like to live in the time of the Utopians?"

"Well—yeah. Sure. A little, sometimes."

"Not exactly easy, was it? Once you got past having all the food and clean water you ever wanted, good clothes, a soft bed, and never having to do sweat-work again in your life, could you picture exactly what you'd be *doing* with all that wealth, all those machines, how it would feel to be a Utopian?"

Hanson shook his head.

"Well, all that—the clean water, the limitless food, the ease and comfort, heat in the winter and cool breezes in the summer that squirt out of a machine at the twist of a knob—was just the *beginning*. Wealth creates wealth and knowledge builds upon knowledge. During the era of the Utopians, knowledge went into a period of exponential increase, and, in one grand surge—from my researches, I have reason to believe it happened within the span of a single human lifetime—people gained control of such immense powers and such total freedoms that . . . well, it *changed* them. The people who resulted from this change—let's call them the post-Utopians—would have been as incomprehensible to the Utopians as the

Utopians are to us. They have wealth and power beyond your craziest dreams. Far beyond anything you even *can* imagine. They are like gods in their power, and yet they're not gods. They are only post-Utopians. Remember that. They're just people with all the technology, all the wealth, all the power anyone could ever want."

Hanson could follow what Boone was saying. He could even understand it. But somehow he could not fit his head around it, could not encompass it, could not feel and accept the truth of it. It was all too strange. He struggled to put into words some reason why he could not entirely accept it. "But—" he began.

He stopped, swallowed, tried again.

"But then—why the Wall?"

"I don't know." Boone began walking, and Hanson had no choice but to follow. Cicero trailed after them like an obliging shadow.

"Let's ask them."

Not many paces distant were two silver metal plates, each roughly ten feet in diameter. With no particular emphasis, Boone strolled onto one. Hanson and Cicero followed.

Something like a twisty silver pillar, a metal cyclone, shot up from the other plate into the air, disappeared into the clouds, and then with a mad looping motion came rushing down upon them. Cicero's hand squeezed Hanson's shoulder reassuringly. "Wait." He heard the word but could not parse its meaning, could not even attempt to run, could do nothing in fact but stand rooted where he was in horror. The crazy thought flitted through his head that now he knew how a mouse felt just before being stepped on by a horse, and then the cyclone slammed down upon them.

He blinked, and the pillar was gone.

Everything around him had changed. He was standing before a grove of orange-roofed mansions—palaces, almost—all raised high above the ground on impossibly thin stilts. For a giddy instant, he thought they were floating, and then, when he realized the truth, feared that the stilts would snap and send these massive structures smashing down upon him.

A great sphere of water hung over the stilted buildings, dwarfing them. What light came through it was wan and diminished, bathing the buildings in a wavering shadowy cool, as if they were under the sea.

"There." Cicero pointed to a balcony, high above them. "A typical dwelling, selected, as you requested, to be as like those you are familiar with as possible. This one is in the Italianate style." After a brief hesitation, Boone nodded. The silver-gray cyclone leaped up and slammed down upon them again, and they were standing on the balcony.

Hanson craned his head and stared up into the water. From here, the sphere was obviously not solid, but a bubble with walls mere yards deep, wrapped around a core of nothing. A shark swam by overhead, twisting its head from side to side, mouth opening and closing in little gasps.

A salt breeze wafted down from the bubble. Multicolored ribbons twisted and curled in the air between buildings and were gone. Staring out at a hundred other balconies, all empty, Hanson felt a sourceless, aching loneliness growing within him, the sort of emptiness one might feel in an abandoned city, an animal certainty that he was surrounded by nothing but vacancy and isolation.

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

Cicero looked regretful. "Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Elsewhere."

"I don't understand."

"They have followed . . . certain trends to their inevitable conclusion," Cicero said. "Would you like to go inside now?"

Boone hesitated, irresolute. "Well, as long as we're here, we might as well take a look."

Cicero walked forward, and the wall parted for him. Boone ducked after.

Hanson had no choice but to follow.

He found himself in a clean, light-filled space. The ceiling was high, the pillars thin, and the leaded-glass windows opalescent. It was a fairy-tale structure, sculpted of moonlight and mist, of soft evening shadows and ice. Even standing within it, he couldn't quite bring himself to believe in its existence. It was too fine, too delicate. Hanson could not think back to a time when he'd been young enough to believe in such a place. Yet—here it was. It made him feel gross and crude by contrast, hairy and smelly as a troll, unworthy.

While he was gawking, Boone had been asking questions. Cicero was explaining to him how the cyclones worked. "—rotating you thirty-seven degrees in time, which is why it feels instantaneous; in actuality, your rest-motion is only a few thousand kilometers per hour." Boone nodded, frowning with concentration and understanding. "Similarly, this doorway is distributed in probability along a curve of thirty-nine thousand miles, so that . . ."

They walked into a room with enormous windows.

Entering, Hanson seemed to grow lighter, his movements unnaturally slow, like those of a man underwater, his head giddy with uncertainty, so that it seemed almost as if he had to push his foot down to bring it to the floor at the end of each step. Otherwise, it would've simply floated up and up, leaving him treading air.

"Where are—" Hanson began, and, somehow placing his feet badly, went tumbling over backward, his balance all *wrong* damnit, falling with impossible slowness and thrashing awkwardly as the floor came floating up toward him.

Cicero reached over to catch and steady him. "I could increase the local gravity gradient, if you wish," he said, but whatever his offer might entail, it meant nothing at all to Hanson. Boone hid an amused smile.

Flushing, Hanson looked away, through the windows.

Glorious and terrifying views! A bright gray-and-white wasteland of rocks and sand, and, in the distance, a range of humped and rounded mountains. Long black shadows stretching toward forever under the blackest of skies.

The bleached skeleton of a giraffe lay on the barren soil just outside the window.

Low over the mountains hung . . . something. Something round and blue and streaked with white, as distant as the Moon but far larger than the Moon ever was.

It was the Earth. Hanson recognized it from the faded Utopian pictures that were preserved in the Courthouse back in Orange, and which a disbelieving bailiff apathetically pointed out to disbelieving visitors as proof that human beings had once, long ago, left the surface of the Earth. This looked just like those pictures, only far more vivid. The colors were unimaginably brighter, the oceans the wildest blue, the clouds dazzling!

It was unbearable.

Hanson twisted wildly away, went tumbling, and, more by luck than not, grabbed the doorway with one rough hand. All in a single surge of panic, he pulled himself through and back into the first room. For a long moment, he knelt there, eyes clenched tight. Madness! How could Boone stand it? After a minute or two, he gathered himself together and spoke to the backs of the other two:

"I'm going outside. Just for a minute."

They were lost in talk. Neither of them responded.

He went outside, and it was afternoon. Only a minute before, when he had entered the room, it had been morning. But there was no mistaking it—the sun, wan and silvery through the water-bubble, had risen higher, the stilted shadows of the buildings had grown longer. He had lost hours, somehow.

Weakly, Hanson leaned against the balustrade, staring not up at the marine animals or out at the bizarrely contoured horizon, but into empty space, at nothing. A tangle of colored ribbons floated in the air, twisting between buildings, a whimsical carnival brightness, and when part of it drifted by him, he reached up impulsively to touch it. One ribbon playfully wrapped itself about his wrist like a tendril, and he found himself standing on a balcony on the building opposite staring into his own startled eyes. He was in both places simultaneously, and then in a third on an entirely different building, staring out into the fields of Heaven where something like a shark's fin—triangular, dark, immense—lifted up from the grass and slowly subsided. All three Hansons were aware of the others' thoughts, but their thoughts were not identical but divergent, different in the qualities of their fear and dismay.

The ribbon released his wrist, and he was one and alone again.

He lurched back from the balustrade and across one of the silver plates. A cyclone slammed down on him.

Then off.

When Hanson stumbled from the plate, he found himself in a windblown hall. Down its center, unsupported, hung a line of vast stone bells. They were as grey and rough-looking as granite, but when he wonderingly reached up a finger to touch one, it *boomed* as if struck by a maul, a deep and despairing vibration that shook his body like the sound of God sobbing.

"Naw." He stepped back from the bell, shaking his head, profoundly disturbed by something he could not put a name to. "Not like that. Naw, not like—that."

At the far end of the hall was another pair of circles—more cyclone plates. He hurried toward them, shamblingly at first, and then faster. The all but imperceptible breeze of his passage brushing against the bells set up an echoing clamor, a turbulent ocean of sound that surged and swelled about him, filling him with primal dread, driving him to greater speed, so that when he reached the plate, he was practically running. His feet touched one circle. A metal pillar rose from the other and slammed down upon him.

Silence.

He was in a room full of shadows and jumbled shapes. Something shifted slightly to one side. There were other furtive movements to the other side, up ahead, just behind. With a start, Hanson realized that he was not alone. The room was filled with prowling animals, great cats the size of cougars. There was painfully little light, but they had, he thought, human faces, and they spoke with the voices of women.

"Oh baby," one murmured, "let me rip you open."

"My fangs are long," said another.

"My claws are sharp."

"My breasts are heavy with milk."

They prowled one over the other, haunches high in the darkness, too many, the light too dim, for Hanson to determine their number. Their eyes and teeth flashed in the gloom. They were in constant motion, slinking, stalking.

"See my long pink tongue."

"Smell my hindquarters."

"Imagine my teeth piercing your lips, tearing the flesh off of your face."

"I'll make sure you suffer a long, long time."

"Oh, honey."

Their voices overlapped in a kind of moaning chorus. Their eyes materialized and disappeared behind flirtatious lashes.

"Poor baby. It's been so long since you experienced anything with intensity."

"*We'll* make you feel something."

"I'll pull out your intestines an inch at a time—slowly, slowly."

It was terrifying. It was too much. Hanson found himself pulling in upon himself, wrapping arms about his body, shivering. It wasn't fair! He didn't know any of the rules here, any of the assumptions. *Cicero,* he thought. If only Cicero were here, he'd know what to do.

"It's all right," Cicero said. "I'm here." He strode through the cat-women as if either he or they were not entirely real, completely ignored by them all. "If you'll look down, you'll see a set of parallel lines glowing faintly on the floor. They mark a safe passage from the one plate to the other. So long as you stay between them, you're perfectly safe."

He took Hanson's arm, led him across the room.

Wobbly, Hanson allowed himself to be led. "How did you find me?" he asked. "How did you know I—?" He stopped, unable to finish the sentence.

"I am a function."

"Oh." The cat-women paced him, musky-smelling and avid-faced. Growling their lust. Ignoring them as best he could, Hanson asked, "Why? Why would anybody want—" He swept out an arm to encompass them all. "*—this?*"

"You have been a long time away indeed," Cicero said, "to have forgotten the need for such entertainments."

They stepped on the plate—

—a grove of slim buildings so tall that the rivers of water falling from their fluted tops dissolved into rainbows and mist long before they could reach the ground.

—a stone cathedral floating within a sad brown sunset that stared at him with a hundred human eyes.

—a twilight plane where armies of metal giants fought with axes and clubs, while small and tireless servitor machines retrieved the scrap and climbed their sides to rebuild the damaged parts.

—a small room smelling of chickens and new-mown hay, where blue flames flickered over revolving bowls of mercury.

—a tangle of snakes that raised agonized heads as large as houses against a steel-plate sky.

—an incandescent mushroom cloud, strangely still and unchanging, like a snapshot of some catastrophic explosion, a frozen instant of horrified time.

The light and heat from this last were excruciating. Hanson threw a hand over his watering eyes, his stinging face, and cried, "Where are we going?"

"Why, wherever you want," Cicero said. "We have been traveling at random, while I awaited your directions."

"Then take me home."

Cicero smiled encouragingly. "And where is that?"

It was as if one of the cat-women had arisen out of nowhere to present him with a riddle encompassing the purpose and end of human life. Hanson's mind was blank; for a long moment he could think of no possible destination to offer in response. Then, "Boone," he said finally. "Take me back to Boone."

There was a light dusting of yellow pollen on the balcony, and a springlike coolness to the air. Cicero gestured Hanson through a doorway and into an unfamiliar room. The walls were lined with dark wood paneling and shelves of leather-bound books. Squares and scrolls hung unsupported in the air, a dozen or more, some bright with moving images, others filled with cryptic text. Boone looked up from a writing desk, and, with a wild cry, stood. Papers scattered from him like birds. He ran through the squares and scrolls as if they did not exist, and hugged Hanson with all his strength.

"Aw, now," Hanson muttered in confusion. "C'mon, now." Embarrassed, he patted the man's back once, twice, feather-light and reluctant touches.

Boone stepped back, smiling through his tears. "Where the hell have you *been?* I stayed here, made this my camp, hoping against hope that you'd—well, that hardly matters. You're back now, that's all that matters. Only—where have you *been?*"

"I was—" Hanson spread his hands and looked down into them helplessly, as if they might contain an answer that was nowhere else to be found. He did not know where he had been. "I think I found some post-Utopians." Boone started and shot him an odd look. "They were . . . strange. Like cats."

"Those were not citizens," Cicero corrected gently. "They were functions. Like me."

"Oh, shut up." Boone wiped away his tears and put his hands on his hips. He glared up at Hanson, who, abruptly and with an odd sense of dislocation, realized that Boone had somehow acquired a mustache and a trim little goatee. "I suppose you think that was funny? I suppose you think you can just follow whatever damn-fool notion enters your head? Well, I have news for *you*. From this moment on, you're not going anywhere without my express permission. You got that? I don't want you going to the shithouse to jerk off without telling me first!"

Hanson flushed. His muscles bunched and knotted under the lash of

Boone's words. He felt that all-too-familiar burning sensation at the back of his throat, the bitter fire of resentment forcibly suppressed. He could crush the little man in his bare hands, if he wanted to, and you'd think that Boone would by God respect that, would at least grant him the elementary caution one gave a manshogger or factory machine with a known history of mangling its operators. It griped him that he did not.

But he needed Boone, and they both knew it. The City of God was comprehensible to Boone in ways it was *not* to Hanson; he needed the little man's direction and guidance. Ducking his head, he felt the old habits of submission, of obedience, of silence, the reflexive knuckling under to the loudest voice, come over him like an old, heavy, and detested coat. "It was only a little while."

"A little while! Eight *months* you were gone, and you call it—" Boone's voice rose sarcastically "—a little while?"

Hanson lifted his hands, palms up, baffled. "Eight months? But—" Boone silenced him with a look. And though he was trying to hide it, there was less anger than fear in that look: fear and loneliness. Eight months Boone had spent by himself, without human company, enduring an isolation that would be a burden for even the strongest man, and would break or even kill a weak one: the gods alone knew what he'd been through, or how he had withstood it.

For long minutes, Boone simply stared at him, as if afraid he was about to turn away and stalk off once more. Then, stooping, he began to gather up his papers. "These are my notes," he said. "Oh, nothing formal, you understand. Just jottings, really. I spent the winter researching the City's records. If you want to call them that. There's enough information available here to drown in, but none of it's organized at all usefully, nothing is presented in any kind of—well, never mind." He passed a hand over his eyes, wiping them clean of tears.

"You've moved," Hanson said.

"Eh? What? Nothing of the sort!"

"The room I saw before had pillars. And windows . . ."

Boone made a dismissive gesture. "Bah! It takes nothing to reconfigure a room. You have no idea the kind of wealth that's fallen into our hands. And power—power *unimaginable* in our old lives!" Papers gathered, he stood behind his desk, tamping them into a neat stack, and, with that simple gesture, regained all of his lost authority. "But this must be bewildering to you. How to explain? Where to begin?"

He thought for a moment.

"I was wrong," Boone said. "Remember when I told you the post-Utopians were people like you and I? I was wrong. I've opened windows into their lives and . . . they were *different*. Different in ways that made them not even remotely human. I think they destroyed themselves, but I'm not sure."

"Destroyed themselves? You mean, like—suicide?"

"Possible—barely. Burned themselves out, more likely. *Transfigured* themselves, perhaps. Indications go both ways. Let me replay for you a conversation you have doubtless long forgotten." With a wave of his hand, Boone swept the squares and scrolls to either side, leaving one, bright as a window, hanging in the center of the room. Through it, Hanson saw the balcony outside, and, upon it, Cicero talking to a hulking brute of a man.

"Where is everybody?" the big man asked.

(Startled, Hanson realized it was himself.)

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Elsewhere."

"I don't understand."

"They have followed . . . certain trends to their inevitable consequences."

Boone gestured brusquely, waving the scroll out of existence. "Such things I have discovered. You cannot imagine. Fantastic, incredible things! I've tasted in surrogate the ineffable pleasures the post-Utopians discovered for themselves, glimpsed darkly, as if through a scrim, their activities and preoccupations. Oh, I am not a scholar for nothing! But where have the post-Utopians *gone?* What became of them? In this one crucial respect, I am as ignorant as you." He turned to Cicero: "Let me ask you again: Where have they gone?"

"Elsewhere."

"Where elsewhere?"

"You would not understand."

"Are they dead?"

"No."

"Will they ever come back?"

"They never went away."

"The hell with you!" To this point the exchange had proceeded with the lifeless quality of a catechism, a rote repetition of questions and answers, unvarying and long committed to memory. But now Boone stood, and, hands behind his back, savagely strode to and fro, as if building up his courage. There was a wild light in his eyes. Finally he asked, "Will we see them again in recognizable form—as something roughly human, capable of communicating and interacting with us?"

"By the nature of what happened," Cicero said, "that cannot be."

"You see?" Boone turned triumphantly to Hanson. "You *see?* The City of God—its buildings and parks, its powers and potentials, the land, the sea, everything—is *ours*. Ours to control, ours to command. It belongs to *us!*"

Hanson glanced uneasily at Cicero.

Cicero said nothing, waiting patiently.

"I dunno," Hanson said. It didn't seem *right* to him, somehow, to make such claims. It didn't seem safe. In his experience, everything had a price, even things you didn't get, and that price was always more than any sane man would agree to pay, given the choice. Not that you ever *got* the choice. The balance was enforced from afar, by powers immaterial and unlocatable, nothing you could even identify, much less get your hands on. "Maybe we oughta just take our time here, not do anything rash."

"No! I've waited too long. Your coming back now is a *sign*. We have to act immediately, right now, without delay!" With a slash of one hand, Boone made all the scrolls and squares disappear. The room looked monkishly bare without them. Turning to Cicero, he said, "Take us to the Throne of God."

"The local utility node, you mean?"

"Whatever you want to call it—bring us there."

Cicero nodded. "As you wish."

The Throne was located in a windowless zone like a jet bead atop a slanted glass tower whose stairs took them a terrifying half-hour to climb. From a distance, the tower looked like a syringe with a black drop of blood at its tip. Within, the walls and stairs alike were transparent, marked only by gleams of reflected and refracted light, making the ascent a sickeningly vertiginous experience. There was no other way to reach it, Cicero explained, because the powers it controlled were too great to be tapped on a whim, even a post-Utopian's whim. At the top, within a hideously unstable region of blackness, they confronted the thing itself—an unornamented silver chair with arm-rests and a high back.

Boone had been here before.

"Control," Boone said. "Even the City of God needs be controlled. *Especially* the City of God!" He paced back and forth before the Throne, talking rapidly and with an unnatural energy. "There are many such towers, each tapping a fraction of the power of the Wall and responsible for the maintenance of a small segment of the lands within. From this chair, one man can control more power than is held by all the mortal nations combined. I have often come here to meditate upon whether to assume responsibility for that power."

"*Don't!*" Hanson said suddenly. He couldn't explain the wave of apprehension that came over him, the fearful certainty that Boone was about to destroy them both; but he felt it nevertheless, down to the soles of his feet. "Just—don't *do* it!"

Boone nodded, not listening. He stopped pacing and struck a pose, hands behind back, legs wide. "Hanson, we stand on the brink of history. It is our duty to humanity—our destiny, even—to tear down the Wall separating the Human Domain from the City of God." He stared at the

Throne without seeming to actually see it, his eyes gleaming and blank with excitement.

"Think of it, Hanson! For ages, we have been made helpless, impoverished by the presence of a City whose accomplishments we could never hope to duplicate, whose very existence made a mockery of all our aspirations. Now . . . now, we can make the Earth a garden, abolish human misery, free men to follow their better natures. We'll fill the skies and roads with great vessels again, millions of them! We'll build cities—*human* cities!—on the Moon, beneath the seas, at the poles! Can you *picture* it, Hanson?"

Hanson dumbly shook his head.

Boone laughed, a shallow, brittle laugh. "No. No, of course you can't. But you'll see—you'll *see*." He took a step toward the Throne, then convulsively whirled about, and, hugging himself, said, "It is a great responsibility I am assuming here, a terrible burden indeed. You see that, don't you? By its very nature, power must be apportioned, divided, distributed—and withheld. That is natural law. Fanatics and opportunists, the self-serving and corrupt, will be drawn to this point like moths to the flame. We must take steps to ensure that this power does not fall into the wrong hands."

Hanson opened his mouth to urge him one more time not to do this thing, and then, overcome with futility, closed it again. What would be the use? A man like Boone, smart as he was, would never listen to somebody like *him*. And why *should* he? He was nothing much in the brains department, he knew it—never had been. Look at the mess he'd made of his life, look at how, all the way along the line, it had been someone *else*—Gossard, Willis, Boone—who had saved him from the consequences of his own stupid, blundering actions. Without them, he never would have made it. Without them, he never would have been standing here in the first place, way up here above the City of God, at the place where all the power of Heaven could be commanded. Without them, he'd be a pile of weathering bones somewhere, already stripped of flesh, already forgotten.

Hanson felt himself flushing with shame, suffused with a dull, ponderous embarrassment that seemed to turn his limbs to lead, congeal him solid where he stood, incapable of speech or action. He was a proud man—pride was what had gotten him into all this in the *first* place, after all. That is, he was a proud man when he had something to be proud *about* . . . but it seemed like he hadn't had that for a very long time. Certainly there was nothing to be proud about now, even though he was standing where no man had stood for who knew how many thousands of years. He'd gotten here in the first place through sheer blind blundering luck, and by taking advantage of the sharper wits of other men, and now that he was *here,* he really only half-understood the situation, or what Boone was proposing to do, or the risks involved, or the rewards that might be gleaned. Even standing here before the Throne of God, even with all the strange and wondrous things that he'd been through, he hadn't been changed or elevated or ennobled—he was still just the common working slob he'd always been. Just a dumb ox. So why should he interfere? What right did *he* have to an opinion?

Keep your mouth shut, then, ox, he told himself bitterly. Let the smart men decide how to run the world. Just as you always have.

But, even with all of that running in his head, he couldn't help but feel a chill slice through him when Boone stepped up to the Throne. His mouth had gone dry with fear, and, when Boone reached forth a hand and actually *touched* the Throne, lightly, caressingly, Hanson felt the small hairs along his spine and on the back of his neck stir and stand up, one by one by one.

"I still don't think you should do this," Hanson said, in spite of himself, unable to keep the terror out of his voice.

"Don't worry," Boone said distractedly. "It's perfectly safe—for *me*." For a long still moment, he made no sound, and then he shook himself, gathering all his will and purpose. "Well," said Boone. "Here it is, then, the moment when History turns, when Mankind's destiny awakes from its long slumber!" He hovered over the Throne a moment, unable to work up the nerve to sit down and unwilling to retreat. "Now!"

He sat.

Grinning nervously, Boone gripped the arm-rests of the Throne. He took a deep breath. "This is a historic moment," he told Hanson. "Impress it on your memory. Forget nothing!"

Then he nodded to Cicero. "I am ready."

"As you will."

Five long needles of light converged upon Boone, piercing his skull.

"Ah!" he cried.

He stiffened, rising up slightly, and was silent.

For a long time, the little man sat wordlessly, staring straight ahead of himself, so far as Hanson could determine, into nothing. "Boone . . ." He reached out a tentative hand, and then, as Boone's wild eyes flicked in his direction, withdrew it. "Are you all right?"

Boone said nothing.

To Cicero, Hanson repeated, "Is he all right?"

"That is a difficult question to answer simply."

Abruptly, Boone raised a hand. "Watch *this!*" The shifting blackness surrounding them transformed itself, so that they were staring across great reaches of the City of God. He pointed past a range of fang-thin pyramids (or maybe they were patterned neon stalagmites, high as skyscrapers—there was no way for Hanson to tell) to a park-like region where a flock of flamingos clustered like great masses of scarlet flowers at the edge of a shallow lake. Then he made his hand into a fist.

At Boone's gesture, the lake exploded upward. Water shot skyward, and, geysering, froze into a hollow latticework tube of ice that twisted and glittered wildly in the sun. Through the mist thrown out by the fantastic exchange of temperatures, Hanson saw the charred bodies of the flamingos falling like cinders.

"Do you know how much energy it took to do that? Fabulous amounts! More energy than was deployed by one of the nuclear weapons of antiquity. Oh, I wish you had the math to understand! It would stagger you to work out the figures!"

Staring at the blue-ice spire, all twisty and interwoven angles, through a fog so dazzlingly bright he winced to look upon it, Hanson felt his mouth go dry. He swallowed hard and said, "What—what's it for?"

"*For?*" Boone laughed like a child. "For no reason at all! For the joy of the thing! Because I *felt* like it. I made it, and I can unmake it, if I wish, just like—that!"

He snapped his fingers.

The construction shattered. And even as the great shards were falling, Boone gestured again, the darkness re-forming around them, so that they were snug in the tiny room again.

"Now," Boone said, suddenly businesslike. "We must make plans. First, the Wall will have to come down. No question about that. But those who wish to benefit from my accomplishment must be brought to heel. I *know* them, you see. Oh, yes, I know their type! They will brush us aside with a pat on the head and a warning not to meddle, if they can; force is their all. They must be taught *respect.*" He closed his eyes, thinking. "An object lesson, perhaps?" Then, offhandedly. "You can have my old rooms if you wish, Hanson. I think they'd suit you."

"You're . . . you're planning to live *here?*" Hanson said in horrified disbelief, staring about at the formless, crawling void that surrounded them.

Boone's eyes snapped open. "What? Of *course* I am! This room is the nexus, the focal point—anything I want can be brought to me here. Food. Books." With an oddly defiant toss of his head, he added, "Women."

Hanson twisted his mouth sourly. He understood well enough what was going on here, for he'd seen it happen before. Dumb as he might be, he wasn't so stupid he couldn't smell shit when somebody pushed his nose into it. Boone was turning himself into a *boss*. Seemed you couldn't get rid of them. Kill all the bosses, and the quiet guy who'd worked alongside you all his life and never once did anybody dirt would step forward to fill the vacancy and become a boss himself, and next thing you knew, you were eating dust at *his* feet, right back where you'd always been. Nothing ever changed; it seemed like nothing ever really *could* change. He clenched and unclenched his fists in helpless and baffled anger.

"First, though—the Wall." Boone lifted his arms grandly.

The blackness before him bulged.

"What—?" Boone began.

A fierce and armless man strode up to the Throne, as stern and beautiful as an angel. His robes were afire, burning continuously without being destroyed. The smell of roasting flesh was nauseating. He frowned down upon Boone with blinded eyes whose sockets were encrusted with dried blood.

"My proud brother," the phantom said. "You have returned."

Boone's eyes widened in astonishment for the briefest of instants, then narrowed again, shrewdly. "I'm not your brother."

"You are a Renunciate. It is the same thing."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means you are human," Cicero said mildly, "of the race which built the City, but one of those who, given the opportunity to enter it, turned away."

Carefully, Boone said, "I am a post-Utopian—a citizen. You cannot question my authority." He slapped his chest. "I hold the key within me."

"You are no citizen!" The phantom glared sternly at Hanson. "*He* is a citizen. *He* holds the key to the City within him. You are allowed in the City only as his property. But even as his property, you have gone too far!"

It was the briefest of looks Boone threw Hanson, but one that spoke eloquently of hurt and betrayal, a look that pierced Hanson to the core of his being, that made him want to throw up his hands and protest his innocence. I didn't mean to do it, he wanted to cry. The key left you for me when you died. It wasn't *my* idea! If I'd known it was important—

But Boone, ever pragmatic, had already turned back to argue with his opponent. "Damnit, you can't condemn me for something I never *did*. I'm not one of your ancient enemies. Those who refused to enter the City with you are dead long ages ago. *I* didn't make that decision. I would have chosen differently."

"No matter! You are a Renunciate. The sin is in the seed. Time cannot expunge it. Your kind shirked the peril, the challenge, the transforming glory and horror, and for what purpose? In order to cling to your *humanity!* Your betrayal is not forgotten, and can never be forgiven. It is too late for regrets."

"Listen!" Boone cried. "Those issues that divided your kind and mine are long dead. Yes, we were separated—let now the two streams reunite! It's time we were reconciled."

A short, angry slash of the head. "No!" The phantom's face was dark as thunder. "Too late, too late!"

"It's never too late!"

"It was *always* too late, for you." Now the flames blazed hotter, so that the apparition became almost painfully bright, dazzling and terrible. "Look—see the price we paid for perfection!"

Briefly, Hanson saw the raw and bleeding wound where the man's genitals had been. He turned his head away, sickened.

"I tore off those parts with my own teeth and, oh, how I savored the pain of it! Could *you* have done as much?"

Boone could not speak.

The phantom smiled disdainfully as the flames burned low again. "I thought not. You came here seeking power and knowledge. Very well. Drink deep of both. Learn what we learned!"

Boone screamed.

It hurt the eye to look at him. He seemed to be vibrating; a kind of still motion possessed him, as if he were simultaneously shooting rapidly upward in the air and descending with equal speed into the ground. And yet he went nowhere. Boone's body had taken on the blurriness of extreme speed, a sort of translucence with nothing visible behind it. His face tensed, stretched, lengthened like cold taffy relentlessly pulled. His mouth stayed open, stretched to its extreme.

He screamed.

He screamed, and the scream went on and on, independent of the air in his lungs, endless, eternal, a condition of existence, a cry of pain and fear that stretched from the beginning of time to its end, like the shrill note of a violin string endlessly stroked, always on the verge of snapping and yet continuing, impossibly continuing. It simply *was*.

Hanson seized Cicero by the shoulders and shook him. "We'll leave!" he cried. "Tell *him*," pointing to the phantom, "to let Boone go, and we'll leave. Tell him!"

"He cannot be reasoned with. Despite his appearance, despite his words, he is *not* a citizen. He is only a security function."

Hanson spun away, reaching for Boone, but Cicero stopped his hand. Slight though he was, Cicero was impossibly strong; Hanson, for all his muscle and bulk, could not free himself from his grip. "It would be extremely dangerous to touch him. It might kill you."

"You!" Hanson shouted to the phantom. "*You* can stop this!"

The phantom turned his sightless frown upon Hanson, but said nothing.

Now the air about Boone was streaking, congealing into vertical strings of shattered light, greenish, as if the vibrations from the Throne were threatening the structure and nature of space about it. Boone hung agonized at the very center of this twisting chaos. His eyes were wide with pain, but sane. Unbearably sane.

His scream went on and on, unendurable.

"Cicero!" Hanson cried again. "He's dying!"

"No. He is suffering, but he will not die. He will not be *allowed* to die. He will wait here as a warning to all who would aspire beyond their state. The years will pass, and then the decades, and then the centuries. To him, the agony will be eternal."

"Get him off, damn you!"

"He is beyond rescue. The security function is implacable and absolute. A Renunciate has sat upon the Throne—he must be punished."

As if in a dream, Hanson felt his hands go to his belt. His gun was still there—the gun he had retained simply because it was the only thing besides Boone that he had brought with him to the City of God, the only thing he possessed that was undeniably his own.

He pulled it out.

This was not him acting; it was his body, obeying no conscious impulse of his own, but only the implacable logic of Boone's unending scream. Hanson watched, horrified, from a place behind his eyes, as the gun swam into view. He expected Cicero to step forward to stop him. He expected the guardian function to confront him.

Neither did.

Awkwardly, he slid the safety to off. He cocked back the heavy hammer. He raised the muzzle toward the blind-eyed guardian brooding over Boone's suffering. But when he did, the guardian turned upon him so unconcerned and disdainful an expression that Hanson knew without being told that it was useless, that mere bullets could not stop so powerful a being.

Stepping close to the Throne, he raised the gun in both hands, so that it pointed right at the center of Boone's face, at a spot directly between the man's eyes. The agonized eyes that did not look at the gun but right through it, as if it hardly existed and certainly didn't matter, boring into Hanson's eyes and pleading as clearly as words ever did:

Kill me.

I can't, he thought, even as his finger clenched around the trigger, squeezing it tight, fighting the balky mechanism of its action, a simple movement that was taking forever it seemed, impossible that it could go on so long, as if time had frozen to a gelid flurry, slowed, solidified, and then—finally—stopped.

The gun fired, with an appalling explosion of sound so loud it seemed to shatter Hanson's ears.

All in an instant, Hanson's hands went flying up and back, the recoil spinning the revolver itself through the air and sending it clattering across the floor. Boone's head slammed back into the Throne and bounced forward again. Flecks of blood and gore were everywhere, tiny droplets landing on Hanson's knuckles, his shirt front, his face. Boone's body pitched forward and fell heavily to the floor, face-down, as limp as a sack of laundry.

Silence.

The guardian turned to Hanson.

"You may assume control of the node now, if you wish."

Hanson raised his head, heavy with guilt, wordless with disbelief.

"It's true," Cicero said. "There's no danger to you. I know you believe yourself to be a Renunciate, but by testimony of the key you carry within yourself, you are not. You are a citizen. All functions must respect you. The security function would never offer you harm, not even to save the City itself."

Hanson shook his head bullishly, a rejection not so much of any specific words or actions as of everything: Boone's death, the raid on the brigand camp, his flight from Orange, the Pit, his childhood, his birth, *everything*.

With a respectful nod, the security function stepped backward, dissolving into blackness.

"Shall I clear this away?" Cicero indicated Boone's body.

Appalled, Hanson opened his mouth to say who knew what, and then caught control of himself and closed it again. Cicero didn't know any better—he was only a function. He wasn't real. Hanson slumped, closing his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Take it away, bury it."

"And this?"

Cicero held up the gun.

"Bury it along with him."

Then, because Boone had after all been a man of the cloth, he added, "Raise a stone or a sun-cross or something over it. Something appropriate." It was a hell of a thing for a man to die so far from home. A hell of a thing to pass unnoticed and unremarked by anyone you ever knew.

He stood waiting while Cicero picked up the body in his arms, stepped into darkness, and returned unencumbered. Then he said, "Let's get out of here."

Cicero led him to the stairwell. When he looked down it, he threw up.

What Hanson needed now, more than anything, was sleep. He was still standing, and that was all. Months might have gone by for Boone and Cicero, but for him, Hanson, by the clock of his heart, it had only been three days since he'd had his shoveling contest with the New Man back in the Pit in Orange. In fact, this was *still* the third evening, as far as he was concerned, although enough had happened in those three days to make it seem like a lifetime had passed, and in all that time he'd only had a fitful nap here and there, not really a decent night's sleep since leaving Orange. He was tired enough to make him believe that he had been awake and on his feet for every second of those eight months that Boone claimed had passed. Every cell in his body yearned for nothingness, darkness, oblivion.

At his direction, Cicero led him back to the spider-legged houses and into Boone's bedroom. It was spare and almost empty, with a small rectangular pad in its center, not much different from a working-class man's futon back in Orange. "Lie here," Cicero said, "and you will be refreshed."

With a nod, Hanson lay down on the pad. It was of an almost neutral texture, neither soft nor hard, just yielding enough to avoid discomfort, a trifle cool to the touch at first and then warm. He closed his eyes.

Five minutes later, he opened them again.

He was wide awake.

Lying on the pad had refreshed his body, cleansed it of fatigue poisons, and returned it to peak strength and vigor. Physically, he was in terrific shape. Mentally, however, he felt the same as before—wasted, blasted, sick to the very core of his being with the mere fact of existence.

He sat up, alert, unblinking, and knew then with an awful clarity that he was never going to be able to make any kind of life for himself here, that Heaven was simply not for the likes of him. He didn't know where home was for him anymore—perhaps there *was* no home for him anymore. But, wherever it was, it wasn't *here*.

He stood.

He walked out to the balcony.

He walked back in.

He walked back out.

Finally, there was no help for it. He was beyond evasions now. Without looking at Cicero, he said, "Take me to the Throne of God."

No trace of Boone's violent end remained. Every least particle of blood had been cleaned away in his absence. The room was as sterile and empty as if no one had walked here for a thousand years. Or as if no one ever *had* walked here, since the first recorded tick of time.

Hanson sat gingerly down on the Throne, his body tensed and aching to leap up and away from its cold electric touch. He felt a surge of icy terror, but fought it down. This was the one moment in his life when he had a chance to actually *change* things, probably the one moment in the lives of all the hundreds of ancestors who'd striven and fought and toiled to produce him in the first place, who had lived their lives and broken their hearts and died without ever encountering a single moment where anything they did had even the remotest chance of effecting a real change in the world. This was the only chance any of them would *ever* have, even if he went back to the human world and had a dozen children and they lived a thousand generations more. This was the one chance for all of them, that chain of lives stretching back into the distant past and ahead into the unimaginable future. This one moment, here and now. He had to give it his best shot, and hope that things would work out all right. He didn't really know what he was doing, or what the consequences of it might be, but he knew he had to *try*. Perhaps it had been no different for God Himself, in the Beginning, when He'd set out to create the world.

He clutched the Throne's arms. "Show me where we are."

Cicero gestured, and the tower, walls and stairs and ceiling alike, became transparent.

Hanson stared over the City to the Wall, and over it as well, as if from a height even greater than the tower's: stared upon a landscape rendered toylike by distance, like a cunningly crafted panorama or three-dimensional map, but one in which things moved and changed position, as in the image cast by a *camera obscura* (one of which he'd seen in the Courthouse in Orange, as a boy), so that you could see horses and transports moving on the roads, and people working in the fields, and cows wandering as they grazed, and trees swaying in the wind. Through some post-Utopian magic, it seemed like he could see everything at once, see it all clearly and distinctly, no matter how far away it was, his whole old world laid out at his feet. First there were the Utopian ruins overgrown in calamity weed and scrub oak; somewhere down there was the clearing in which he'd met Boone. Then the road up which the transport had come so very long ago, leading back to the ancient highway that stretched back to the south, past the SI garrisons and gypsy camps, the tiny crossroads towns, the vast glinting silver snake of the river, the high iron bridge over the Hudson, and on to the patchwork of hardscrabble farms beyond, which clung precariously to a series of gently rolling hills like the folds of a carelessly thrown quilt. Then, finally, by the horizon, a low gray smear of buildings where Orange was. Leaning forward, looking closer, he could make out the fetid streets of the Bog, rising up into Blackstone (he almost thought he could see the window of his old apartment, where he had lived with Becky for so many bittersweet years), and then up into the Swank, tidy tree-lined squares surrounded by fine old brick-and-iron buildings. He could see the rusty-orange Courthouse dome, one of the few specks of color in a sea of brown wood and gray brick, and imagined that if he could somehow see *within* the dome itself he would see himself as a small child staring fascinated at the table where the image from the *camera obscura* shifted and glittered, as if the Utopian optics through which he was looking could somehow let him see back through time as well as off through space (as who knew if they could *not?*). . . . And then, raising his eyes, up the slopes of Industry Hill to the highest point in Orange, he saw at last the massive ugly bulk of the State Factory, where he had slaved away the best days of his life, where he had poured out his youth like water onto thirsty ground. If he leaned forward a bit more, he could see the lip of the Pit itself, and tiny figures moving on it, shoveling, turning away to dump their coal onto the pile, turning back to shovel again, bending and straightening, their tiny match-stick arms and legs scissoring, and perhaps one of them was Gossard, or the New Man, or—recalling his fancy of a moment before—perhaps even Hanson himself, staring at the Wall of the City of God as he shoveled, thinking all the while about God staring back at him with a huge watery eye, tall as the sky.

Something caught in Hanson's throat, and he blinked back sudden tears. No one knew better than he not to romanticize the world stretched out there below, no one knew better than he the miseries and brutalities it contained, the sickness and the poverty and the filth, the tyranny and murder. From up here, you couldn't see the crooked politics and institutionalized cruelties that were housed beneath the Courthouse dome that looked so picturesque and attractive. From up here, you saw only the pastoral beauty of the fields and the patchwork farms; you didn't see the grotesquely mutated animals and the cows with cancerous running sores and the "sour spots" in the fields, places too thoroughly drenched in ancient chemical poisons for anything to ever grow there again for millennia to come. Hanson *knew* all that, none knew it better.

And yet, even so, he was homesick.

He wanted to go home, wherever home was. Maybe not back to Orange, necessarily, but *home*. Back to the human world. Back where he belonged. Back to where children went fishing in the summertime and women leaned out of windows to catch a breath of air at evening, back to where cows grazed and people drank beer and laughed, back to where folks fell in love and had babies and grew old and died. Away from the inhuman, unchanging, cruel and incomprehensible alien splendor of *this* place.

"All that you can see, from here to the Wall," Cicero said, "is subject to your manipulation."

"How do I turn off the Wall?" Hanson asked gruffly.

"A twenty-mile section of it is under your control." Cicero waved a hand, indicating an arc reaching from horizon to horizon. "It can only be turned off by depriving this entire segment of the City of all higher functions. I do not advise it. If, however, that is what you wish to do, I will guide you through the protocol."

Hanson took a deep breath. "A'right," he said. "Let's do it."

He seized the chair's grips. The needles converged upon his skull.

To his surprise, it did not hurt. A glowing sensation radiated from the base of his spine, a pervasive warmth like the sun on a summer's afternoon. Lucid calm flooded his brain, and he became aware of a thousand distant structures and devices, not as any kind of detailed knowledge but in much the same way he was aware of parts of his own body, ignorant of their inner workings but, with the slightest concentration, in control.

"What do I do now?"

"Make yourself aware of the Wall."

"A'right." He felt it now, within him, a glowing length of immaterial and impervious substance, reaching down three times further into the bedrock than it extended above the ground. A thin, thin line reached even further down, impossibly far, toward the core of the Earth, tapping energies incomprehensibly greater than any he'd ever imagined. No phantom guardian appeared. No one challenged him. He did not ascend, descend, vibrate, scream. "What now?"

"Imagine a blue triangle. Within it, imagine a yellow circle. Now imagine that circle turning red."

He did.

Twenty miles of the Wall ceased to be.

It took Hanson three weeks to make his way out of Heaven to the mortal realm of York. He could still summon a cyclone by stepping on a silver pad, but he could not make it take him where he wanted to go. His first attempt carried him so far from the Wall that he was not tempted to try a second time, lest he lose himself so thoroughly he might never find his way out again.

Without Cicero, the City of God was unspeakably dangerous, capricious in unforeseeable ways. There was, so far as he could tell, no malice to it, but he was like a child lost in a steel mill; power was everywhere, and he did not understand its purposes. The post-Utopians hadn't turned off any of their machines before they had gone away to wherever it was they had gone. And Cicero, who understood its workings, was gone too, canceled out along with the twenty miles of Wall, never mentioning that he was one of the "higher functions" that Hanson's command would send to oblivion. Hanson found he missed Cicero more than he did Boone, though the one was only a function and the other a real human being.

It was an awful thing to have to admit to himself.

He lived off rain water and what vermin he could catch, and he was often sick. It was a hellish time for him. But he kept going, determined that if he were going to die, he would at least make it to the Human Domain first. He would die on his own side of the Wall.

When finally, starving, Hanson crossed over into the borderlands of York, he was taken prisoner by a troop of State soldiers. They were out in force, establishing a string of camps where the Wall had been, digging ditches and earthwork ramparts, re-creating a crude parody of the Wall in order to control access to the City of God and its many presumed treasures. They were all of them badly spooked by this turn of events, fearful and uncertain of what the future would bring. An unquestioned chock of their reality had crumbled without warning, and if *that* could happen, then who was to say what else might or might not?

"Hands up!" the soldier shouted. He held his rifle too tensely. He was ungodly young, a child really. When Hanson obeyed, he eased hardly at all, remaining as taut as an over-wound spring. "You're in bad trouble, mister!"

"A'right," Hanson said. His head swam dizzily; he had to fight down a suicidal urge to caper and dance. But even in his weak and giddy state, he was particularly anxious not to be shot, not at this late date. "Y'caught me. You're the boss. I'll do whatever you say."

"Where'd you come from, anyway? How'd you get past the line?"

Line? "I came from out there—east." He gestured with his head, keeping his hands up as steady as he could. "Beyond where the Wall used to be."

The boy's eyes widened.

Two more soldiers came out of the woods. They both looked tough, but one looked mean as well.

"What you got?" one asked.

"This'n says he come from over the Wall!"

"Yeah, right."

"So what do we do with him?"

The soldiers glanced one at another. There was an uneasy moment of balance when Hanson's fate could have gone either way. The mean-looking soldier cocked up his mouth to one side, and, unslinging his rifle, said, "Too much fucking trouble to walk him back, if you ask *me*. . . ."

The boyish soldier gaped at him, too horrified to interfere.

Talking quickly, saying any fool thing that came into his head, Hanson said, "Hey, any of you boys come from Orange? That's where I'm from, that's my neck of the woods. Maybe you got family back there? What are their names? Might be I know them." Crazy, nonsensical stuff he was saying, but it didn't matter—anything to establish contact.

The third soldier stared hard at him. Then—

"Fuck it," he said, and pushed the rifle barrel out of line, away from Hanson. The mean-looking one gave him an angry look, then turned his head to the side, spat, and re-slung his rifle.

The soldier who'd just saved Hanson's life looked tired. "We'll take him to camp. He can answer questions there."

They tied his hands behind his back and started down the road. Hanson went quietly. He knew his answers would not please their superior officers. Their questions would be all wrong. It didn't matter, though. He had done his part.

He had opened the City of God for them.

It might be some good would come of it. Anything was possible. He didn't intend to dwell on it, though. What they did with it was their concern, not his.

They walked on in silence for a while. Hanson felt weak and dizzy. After a mile or so, one of the soldiers struck a narc on his thigh, took a long drag to get it started, and stuck it in Hanson's mouth.

He mumbled his thanks. They wouldn't untie his hands, but after he'd sucked in, the young soldier who'd captured him took the narc out again so he could exhale.

The two older soldiers tended to keep a cautious distance from him, but the younger one hung at his side, not frightened any longer but curious, intrigued, obviously thinking over what Hanson had said earlier. Finally, he couldn't keep his questions in any longer. "You really been—" he made a gesture with his head, "back *there?*"

Hanson nodded wordlessly.

"Inside the City, I mean."

"*Ai.* S'pose I have."

"You ever seen . . . you know?"

The kid asked it in a hushed kind of way, the religious feelings of his childhood apparently not entirely dead yet, for the blasphemy of a ragged outcast like Hanson claiming to have come from the City of God was clearly thrilling and alarming to him. His buddies, skeptical, intrigued, moved a little closer to hear Hanson's answer.

"You mean God?" Hanson began to laugh. He couldn't help it. Stumbling to a halt, he managed to control himself, to still the painful laughter for just long enough to look into the boy's anxious face and say, "Fool! D'you mean to say you ain't heard yet? *God is dead!*"

He doubled over then, roaring with laughter. His eyes filled with tears, and still he couldn't stop. He laughed until he choked.

The soldiers waited until he could breathe again. Then they yanked him upright and double-checked his bonds.

They all four headed down the road. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's,* 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Appetizers

Herewith, a few tidbits before the literary feasts ahead.

A User's Guide to the Millennium (Picador USA, hardcover, $23.00, 288 pages), collects J. G. Ballard's essays and reviews from the past thirty years into a single, wide-ranging volume that serves as a model of engaged, affectionate, provocative metacriticism. Unlike the plot-retellers and academic nitpickers who often masquerade as critics, Ballard uses whatever books and artists come under his purview as springboards to fascinating, expansive discussions. Granting authors and artists the distinction of taking them completely at their word, Ballard explores with his scalpel-like, prophetic prose the cultural and sociopolitical implications of their work, occasionally uncovering an author with egg on his face. (The museum curator John Pope-Hennessy, for instance, comes off as particularly ignorant of his own life!) Organized with eminent clarity, rife with fascinating autobiographical insights, this book contains gems that will long outlast the quotidian clay in which they formed.

I rely daily with confidence and thankfulness on the massive hardcover version of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* by John Clute and Peter Nicholls. Now, with the appearance of the multimedia miracle known as *Grolier Science Fiction* (Grolier Electronic Publishing, CD-ROM for Windows and Macintosh, $59.95), I have to rely on some hardware as well. But this updated version of the Clute-Nicholls reference makes shifting platforms well worth the effort. With generously expanded entries, tons of hyperlinks, photos of authors and their books, movie stills, filmclips, soundbites, and overall intelligent and attractive design, this simple-to-navigate software is the next best thing to attending a Worldcon set in some SF Valhalla.

A CD-ROM of a different stripe is *Telecommunication Breakdown* (TVT Records, for audio players as well as Windows and Macintosh, $17.99), by those sonic saboteurs from my hometown, Emergency Broadcast Network. The trio known as EBN are dissident, creative audiovisual scavengers: twenty-first century bricoleurs. They turn snippets of sound and flashes of imagery, backed by techno beats, into assaults on our complacent consumption of entertainment. The twenty tracks and three full videos here—with such titles as "Electronic Behavior Control System" and "We Must Have the

Facts"—flare across your computer screen and out your speakers like—well, one of Ballard's own nightmares. Inherently interesting to any SF reader.

A good idea too long in coming is the ongoing *Spectrum* series that collects the year's best fantastic art into one sumptuous printed museum. The latest is *Spectrum 2* (Underwood Books, trade paper, $22.95, 140 pages), edited by Cathy Burnett, Arnie Fenner, and Jim Loehr. Handling this creamy, glossy book is like cradling a Brancusi sculpture, it's so lush and aerodynamically contoured. The vibrantly reproduced artwork is intelligently separated into different divisions (editorial, books, comics, etc.), and the choice of artists mixes old pros (Frazetta, Maitz, Whelan) with new stars-to-be. In the Kingdom of the Eye, *Spectrum* rules!

Adopting the motto of guerrilla philosopher Hakim Bey—"We are not bored!"—Mark Frauenfelder, Carla Sinclair, and Gareth Branwyn have made it their mission to bring more and bigger excitement, optimism, and sheer craziness into our beat-up old world. They did this first with their zine, *bOING-bOING,* and now with *The Happy Mutant Handbook* (Riverhead Books, trade paper, $15.00, 205 pages). Reading this lavishly illustrated collection of turn-ons, pointers, rants, interviews, advice, and alternate realities is like watching six hours of the best Saturday morning cartoons from another planet while consuming three boxes of Count Chocula spiked with smart drugs. My head is still spinning!

From Wordcraft of Oregon (PO Box 3235, La Grande, OR 97850) comes the first of our small press offerings. Lorraine Schein's *The Raw Brunettes* (chapbook, $6.00, 40 pages) is a moon-bedazzled poetic account of the wild women known as the Raw Brunettes, a coven of lusty liberators who occupy themselves with such eldritch matters as insuring that a new century is born properly. Incantatory and mysterious, Schein storms all gloomy fortresses with a wink and a leer.

Dark Regions Press (PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524) has assembled a winner in *Sensuous Debris* (trade paper, $6.95, 96 pages), a Bruce Boston sampler, 1970-1995. *Asimov's* readers need not be told that Boston's poetry—whether mimetic, fantastic, horrific, or stefnal—combines a keen alchemical eye with precision wordsmithing the envy of many mere mortals.

The busy folks at Fiction Collective Two (Unit for Contemporary Literature, Campus Box 4241, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790) continue to launch Scud missiles of narrative our way with wild abandon. First, check out *Degenerative Prose* (trade paper, $9.00, 148 pages), an anthology edited by Mark Amerika and Ronald Sukenick. A plethora of forms and voices succeed in their stated goal: "to move constantly beyond literature, beyond the definitions of particular linguistic realities, beyond language itself, to change the world we live in." And after your senses and neural pathways have been sufficiently reamed, try the following. Curtis White's *Anarcho-Hindu* (paper, $7.95, 113 pages), which casts the goddess Siva as a Midwestern housewife in the wryest such fusion since John Barth's *Chimera* (1972). The stories in Harold Jaffe's *Straight Razor* ($7.00, paper, 132 pages) mix SF apocalypses with sexual warfare in a blend that shocks by its faithfulness to our current telemediated reality. And finally Ricardo Cortez Cruz, in his *Five Days of Bleeding* (paper, $7.95, 129 pages), delivers a riotously comic African-American version of Joyce's "Nighttown" episode from *Ulysses* (1922), which Joyce himself might have written if the Irishman had drunk Colt .45 instead of Guinness.

I'm Too Sexy For My CPU

In our contemporary world of twelve-year-old killers and sixteen-year-old supermodels (who work in a field where burnout hits by age twenty), it takes little extrapolative power to forecast a future even more skewed toward the commodification of youth and beauty, sex and death. But to tease from such bare extrapolations their most outrageous implications, then to embody the theory in believable characters moving through an ultra-tangible world seen through a scrim of gorgeous, supercharged prose the likes of which SF has seldom enjoyed—Ah, that takes the perverse genius of a Richard Calder.

Calder's first novel was the astonishing *Dead Girls* (1993), in which we were introduced to two adolescents of a decaying future: Ignatz Zwatz and his doll-girl Primavera. In the next century a rogue nanoplague—escaped from android sex toys—now feasts among humanity, transforming all the female children of its tainted male carriers into sterile dolls: half-organic, half-"quantum-magical" succubi. Plainly, should all young females be born dolls, humanity will be extinct. Interspecies war is declared, countries are ravaged, economies collapse, niche-life blooms. Narrated by Ignatz, a smitten traitor to his race, *Dead Girls* was a helter-skelter eroticizing of *Peter Pan* (1904), a cinematic barrage of strange emotions and outré images.

The sequel, *Dead Boys* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $20.95, 208 pages) carries forward the tale with all of the wild-eyed obsessional hysteria of its predecessor. Yet it's a more cloistered, less expansive book, suffering a bit from "middle-itis." (The third book is projected to be called *Dead Things*.)

Primavera is now a *dead* dead girl, her ravaged CPU womb literally kept in a bottle by the despondent Ignatz, as drug and talisman. Through the wormhole womb Ignatz's unborn daughter, Vanity St Viridiana, sends messages from the future, attempting to remake the past. The artificial Elohim—the dead boys of the title—now make their appearance as Inquisitorial persecutors of the dead girls. As Ignatz falls deeper into the womb-spell, past, present and future become inextricably tangled, until history goes "nonlinear." His very identity is usurped by that of a dead boy, Dagon. The book ends on what seem to be "the last bars of reality's finale," leaving me to wonder what eldritch territory the third volume will cover.

What I most miss here is Primavera's presence, not really compensated for by her sketched-in daughter. Also, the entropy of this scenario is so thick that the Asian atmosphere—so rich in the first book (Calder himself resides in Thailand)—becomes skeletal.

However, with its high-calorie, mucilaginous mix of Egyptology and Jack the Ripper, Nabokov and Beardsley, flesh and metaphysics, *Dead Girls* croons like Nine Inch Nails covering nostalgic music-hall ballads.

Slab Life

How crude and primitive we first-generation cyberpunks and our works now look! Born mid-century or earlier, improvising our tools as we raced ahead into the mists of futurity, the lineaments of the fabulous beast we stalked as yet unclear, we did the best we could, clearing the underbrush and staking the waterholes for those to follow, just as Burroughs and Pynchon had done for us. And then, when we finally turned around, wearied, to look behind, imagine our surprise to see that the descendants we had spawned on the native tribes we had visited and who had taken us as demigods were baroque mutants surpassing their progenitors in every way!

Such anyhow were my thoughts upon finishing Simon Ings's new novel, *Hotwire* (HarperCollins UK, paper, £4.99, 343 pages). This superb novel is the very model of postmodern, trans-cyberpunk fiction. Perhaps only a cusp writer like Ings (born 1965) could have produced this laser-gazed logicbomb of a book, simultaneously appalling and heartening, monitory and embracing. All the lessons and insights and techniques that the first generation of cyberpunks donned like sometimes ill-fitting garments, Ings has fully *internalized.*

Set in the same universe as his *Hot Head* (1992, and inexcusably missed by me, a flaw I intend to remedy soon), this new book is eminently independent and comes to a satisfying closure, while still opening outward toward new adventures.

Ings's future can be synopsized thus: not long from now, Earth is a patchwork of poverty and wealth, shiny new cities and plaguey ruins, all as a result of a recent war fought with the Massives, rogue AI's. No clear victory was won by either side, for the Massives still flourish, on Earth as intelligent networks and in space as mad habitats where exotic lifeforms are bred in tanks and on slabs of pain. Various factions—pro- and anti-Massive, as well as neutrals—pursue their diverse goals, utilizing exotic *techniq,* nano- and bio-based miracles.

Our window into this powermad scenario is Ajay Seebaran, a hired gun with assorted employers. Brilliantly sketched, Ajay is motivated primarily by a desire to buy his sister repairs for the bodily damage he carelessly brought on her. When his latest assignment brings him into contact with the more-than-human girl called Rosa, engineered prodigy of a Massive, he finds his old surety leaking out, to be replaced by a bitter new knowledge.

There is nothing extraneous in Ings's writing, and much that is marvelous. Blink between sentences, and you might miss something. From the Carrollian environment of Rosa's birthplace to the favelas of Rio, Ings offers cinematic thrills galore. (I kept thinking that director Stephen Frears, of *My Beautiful Laundrette* [1985] and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* [1987] would be a natural to bring this book to the screen.)

Toward the end of *Hotwire,* Ings says, "The world . . . had left its languages lagging so far behind. . . ." But by writing this very book, Ings has made that statement false.

Deadly Geometries

If you enjoy the kind of existential supernatural terror—the "cosmic horror"—purveyed by such masters as Michael Shea and Thomas Ligotti, Colin Wilson and Fritz Leiber, then you must sneak out of your home while the roaming bands of the undead are resting and purchase Marc Laidlaw's *The 37th Mandala* (St. Martin's Press, hardcover, $23.95, 352 pages).

Best known for his satiric SF, Laidlaw also writes a fine fantasy, horrific or otherwise. (In this book, his SF roots crop up as he offers a possible scientific explanation for his terrors. Heck, even H. P. Lovecraft appeared in *Astounding!*)

Like his previous novel, *The Orchid Eater* (1994), *Mandala* is set mostly in contemporary California, a terrain Laidlaw knows from the inside out, and which he can evoke with the deftest scratch of his bloody pen. It is a land populated with dreamers and druggies, New Age snake-oil salesmen and their deluded flocks, the homeless poor and the dilettante rich. Like Ramsey Campbell with his English localities, Laidlaw does not have to go to any exotic venues to find horror, making us see the everyday sights we mostly ignore as truly terrifying.

Derek Crowe, hypocritical author of trendy New Age books, has stumbled on a dreadful truth he refuses to take at face value: humanity is the prey of extradimensional psychic vampires known as "mandalas." Like hovering, colorful, baroque pain-vacuums, they suction off our emotional welter. Kept in relative restraint for millennia by the shamanistic rituals of a Cambodian hill tribe, they are now on the loose, manipulating humans more directly. For his own selfish gain, the disbeliever Crowe twists these borrowed truths around into a blithe best-seller. (As Laidlaw keenly observes, there is no such thing as "occult pessimism" in the current marketplace.) At this point, two of Crowe's fans—Michael and Lenore Renzler, amateur punks—become vessels for the mandalas in these beings' quest to more completely break through to our world.

With the fast-paced narrative split between Crowe and the Renzlers, and with several key flashbacks prolonging the suspense, we follow the building tension and carnage wreaked by the mandalas and their human pawns, until its culmination in San Francisco's Club Mandala.

What I was particularly impressed with was Laidlaw's ability to depict the mandalas on the same level of representational reality as the humans. Most fantasy set in contemporary times breaks down precisely when natural and unnatural face each other, and the latter comes off cartoonish. But Laidlaw's hallucinatory yet clear-eyed depictions of the mandalas interfacing with people render them fully believable.

Will a New Age of Suffering be unleashed, or will simple human goodness somehow mitigate the disaster? To find out, you must become intimate with the stuff of Laidlaw's elegant nightmares.

Love and Death in the Cosmic Funhouse

SF contains numerous tropes that resonate powerfully with our deep psychic structures. Perhaps one of the strongest is that of "omnipresence," the ability to be anywhere or anywhen at will. Whether omnipresence is embodied in a network of matter transmitters or one of more conventional vehicles, this dream of triumphing over the strictures of time and space, of enjoying godlike immanence, fascinates like no other. A quick catalog of writers who have been captivated by this notion would have to include Simak, Heinlein, Moorcock, Farmer, Stith, Cherryh, Norton, Laumer, Silverberg, Bear, and Pohl. Plainly, there is something deep and strange and alluring in this notion, attracting the attention of some of the field's best and most ambitious writers.

To this list must now be added William Barton. And I'm happy to say that his new book—despite being highly recursive—stands in no literary shadows, but instead blazes forth with its own pure fire of excitement and ideation.

The Transmigration of Souls (Warner Aspect, paper, $5.50, 411 pages) opens amid much strangeness, all cleverly interpolated. A century or so in the book's past, American lunar explorers secretly discovered a buried stargate. After visiting a few planets and reaping much alien technology, they inexplicably retreated to Earth, sealing themselves and their wonders inside a Fortress America, leaving the rest of the overpopulated, overburdened globe to fend for itself. Now, two competing teams—one Arab, one Chinese, both unwitting of what awaits them—are just heading back to the Moon, hoping to reactivate the old US base. Pursuing them is an American vessel.

What happens next is simply this: members of all three teams fall into the Gnostic gears of the universe.

It turns out that the stargates are not what they first appeared to be. They are entries to entire alternate timelines, the skeins of the Multiverse. Instead of blithely visiting a familiar Alpha Centauri, say, the hunters and the hunted are falling through layers of ontological reality. Moreover, they must contend with the "Toolbox managers," the quasi-omnipotent assistants of a departed God, one of whom happens to be a transfigured human SF writer previously lost in the funhouse. (Shades of Hubbard!)

Barton populates his book with intriguing, clearly delineated characters, flawed and noble, avaricious and altruistic. This proves essential, as their ultimate destinies are linked to their innermost selves. One of them, Ling Erhshan, happens to be an inveterate reader of SF, providing Barton with a legitimate way to reference dozens of previous SF works in the same vein he's mining. Yet despite this, because of Barton's unrelenting grounding of his text in sensory details, nothing seems arbitrary, his creation is concrete.

Greedy for thrills, I raced through this adrenergic, thought-provoking tale faster than any book I've read in recent memory. Like John Barnes, Barton has a sensibility and style that is half cynical, half sentimental, half postmodern, half old-fashioned, half scientific, half fantastic. It's a potent brew, fit for whatever gods haunt the Multiverse.

World of the Unfurling Rose

I love the books of Kathy Acker because reading them is like listening to a potent, whispering female voice that compels your mind to raise anchor and drift off to other dimensions. As you gradually set sail away from consensus reality, the seductive, partially comprehensible tale being uttered—whose ultimate meanings seem forever to lurk just out of reach—spins on like the ramblings of a stoned Sheherazade, rich with Sphinx wisdom. Whether the objective events in Acker's stories are fantastic or not—and they often are—the very *form* of the stories is the essence of the unreal: identity and the physical world flow like water, the borders between death and life are erased, and the universe seems pregnant with the uncanny.

Acker's latest is *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (Grove Press, hardcover, $21.00, 277 pages). Taking the archetype of the outlaw woman (think Russ and Charnas heroines here), stirring in Circe, Antigone, and Robert Louis Stevenson among others, Acker fashions a postmodern fairy tale of the zigzag voyage that leads to illumination and liberation. As always, she grounds her critiques of social power structures in the human body, with selfish sex, rape, abortion and violence standing in for more abstract forms of domination. Like some kind of burnt-out Red Riding Hood who's thrown in with the wolves—or perhaps like Terry Southern's Candy—the eponymous Pussy journeys by motorcycle and sailing ship, accompanied by her sordid crew, to the island that "looks like a dead woman's body," where the treasure lies.

Like her spiritual ancestor Kafka, Acker is most concerned with using fiction as an axe to cleave the frozen sea within us, disdaining any "master narrative" for her story, modeling her fiction on the labyrinth, not the racetrack.

If you enjoy this book, you'll want to have the soundtrack. Working with the Mekons, Acker has released a CD of the same title (available from Quarterstick Records, PO Box 25342, Chicago, IL 60025). With an engaging mix of music and spoken text, this surprisingly melodious CD calls up everyone from Fairport Convention to New Order, from XTC to Big Audio Dynamite. With maybe just a wee hint of Stevie Nicks.

Sewer Visions

If you've ever seen a Vittorio de Sica movie called *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1971), with its alternately romantic and chilling depiction of Jewish wealth and privilege, sanity and culture about to be overwhelmed by a rising Nazi tide, then you'll have some notion of the pleasures to be derived from *Child of the Light* (White Wolf, paper, $5.99, 438 pages), a dark fantasy novel by Janet Berliner and George Guthridge.

Set exclusively in a lovingly rendered Berlin and environs during the years 1918 to 1936, *Child* revolves around three main characters all roughly the same age. Solomon Freund, son of a tobacconist, is a mild, sensitive Jewish boy, occasionally afflicted with accurate prophetic visions he cannot understand. His best friend, Erich Weisser, a Gentile, is darker, more brooding, his temper ameliorated only by an affection for dogs that grades into the telepathic. Both are in love with Miriam Rathenau, also Jewish, a precocious, flirty but goodhearted child of wealth. Together, as they move from childhood to adult status, the three will be taken up by forces much larger than themselves, coming to embody all the stresses and contradictions of a Germany falling into madness.

While the book's first half reads like an uncommonly fine Young Adult novel, reflecting both the age of the viewpoint characters and the relative tranquillity of their country, hints of the darkness and brutality to come often intrude, especially in the form of the visions Sol experiences while playing or hiding in a disused storm drain that runs beneath his father's shop. In the book's latter half, the authors unflinchingly portray the decadence and treachery, terror and sadism abroad in the land. (Much of the verisimilitude and empathy evident in the writing undoubtedly stems from Berliner's family history; her parents were themselves expelled from Nazi Germany.)

The fantasy in the novel seems absolutely natural, the supernatural weft in the mimetic warp. The horrors of Nazi Germany, which in lesser hands might have seemed overfamiliar, are made fresh by the unique perspective of these victims and by an acute eye for the telling detail. In addition, the authors play a neat game of melding real historical figures with their fictional ones, inserting such luminaries as Nabokov and Brecht into the plot. Even an onstage Hitler manages to come off unclichéd.

At one point, Miriam thinks of her famous uncle, Walter Rathenau, "It would unnerve her too, if she were forced to look into the face of his humanness." So this book should unnerve its readers, with its all too human face.

Intruders in the Dust

Although Alexander Jablokov debuted in print as early as 1985, it was only with the appearance of his first novel, *Carve the Sky* (1991), that his talent and ambition became evident. *Carve the Sky* was a deeply imagined and elegantly stylish recasting of many of the dearest stories that SF holds to its heart. A skillful mystery-cum-grand-tour, it managed to convey the sheer weight of its imaginary history better than any other recent novel I can recall.

In Jablokov's twenty-fourth century, our solar system is fully tenanted, a garden of believably bizarre cultures, sects, technologies, and individuals. A raw and demanding Mars is populated with hard-edged anarcho-libertarians who occasionally flirt with dictatorship. The paranoid Technics skulk among the asteroids. And Earth hosts a willfully retrograde society—one that favors swords and faux-feudal demesnes over hi-tech and corporations—yet remains a power player on the solar stage. Flavoring his dynamically outbound narrative with tastes of Poul Anderson and Frank Herbert, Heinlein, Asimov, and Vance, Jablokov reminded me most of the early George R. R. Martin, as he blended meditations on art, love, and treachery with interplanetary derring-do.

Jablokov's newest novel is a prequel—or codicil—to *Carve the Sky. River of Dust* (AvoNova, hardcover, $22.00, 336 pages) takes place a few decades prior to the events of the first book. (Pleasant kicks arise upon encountering younger versions of familiar characters, primarily a Martian named Miriam Kostal, who's a far cry from her assured older self we first met.) Compared to its predecessor, *Dust* has a radically different feel, due to its more limited scope and divergent esthetic goals, and while I must admit to enjoying *Carve the Sky* more, this new volume offers many pleasures and frissons. Set entirely on Mars, it's a valuable addition to the new Red Planet canon being built by Attanasio, Robinson, McAuley, and others.

Dust opens in a fashion that reprises *Sky*'s start: both books haul us in headfirst by depicting a potent female character encountering a life-or-death situation with shadowy implications. But whereas *Sky*'s female, Vanessa Karageorge, went on to become fully rounded and part of her book's love story, Brenda Marr of *Dust* proves to be an unpleasant fanatic whose thread tapers out partway through.

This diffusion of readerly identification is typical of *Dust*. Although the book is basically the tale of two fratricidal brothers, Hektor and Breyten Passman, and the tumultuous politics they are caught up in, even their story seems somehow distal. Unlike *Sky*, which was mediated mostly through the charming perceptions of Anton Lindgren, *Dust* has no such silky-tongued host. It's a book that, like the Martian environment, renders mere humans cosmically insignificant.

Where the real accomplishment of *Dust* is visible is not in the Homeric family tragedy of the Passman brothers, but in Jablokov's juicy, Delanyesque creation of Martian society, its "corridor ecology." Jablokov's Mars is unterraformed, and its underground dwellers have created living spaces and modes of being, philosophies and artforms, unlike anything you might imagine. While the juggernaut of plot that Jablokov whips forward grinds individuals beneath its wheels, the reader's attention is transfixed by Martian festivals and customs, habits and prejudices that feel absolutely organic, yet utterly strange.

Like the artificially constrained flow of insidious dust that meanders through the corridors of the city of Scamander, Jablokov's prose will slip between your suit joints, breeding "dust madness" in your bones.

The Machinery of Ghosts

It is now a full two decades since a callow and rather silly twenty-four-year-old, straw still clinging to his forelock and using the byline "Timothy Powers," published a couple of competent yet unnoticed novels in the infamous Laser Books line (novels now somewhat coldheartedly and revisionistically omitted from his dustjacket list of publications). Few readers then could have pored over these awkward entrails and foretold the birth of one of SF's most accomplished, mature, darkly humorous, and offbeat writers. Yet that is indeed what the plucky lad latterly rechristened "Tim Powers" has indeed become. With a subsequent six novels and little if any short fiction, Powers has carved out a niche for himself in the Pantheon that houses the busts of John Crowley, Peter Beagle, Thorne Smith, Neal Barrett, Ray Bradbury, and Richard Brautigan.

Powers's post-Laser work is remarkably consistent and reiterative. Like Nature playing Her old but alluring game with the four seasons, he juggles the same bag of tokens in patterns of archetypical force. No matter what the setting or ostensible plot-engine of a Powers novel, many of the same characters and talismans crop up. A left-handed, conflicted, Fisher King hero bearing psychic and physical wounds; the redemptive or cursing nature of shed blood; the nature of familial obligations; beer, sewers, doppelgängers, lost lovers, the Romantic Poets, ships, the ocean, fine tobacco and whiskey—the Powers universe is always furnished with emblems and figures that hold both inner meanings for him and outer significance for us. Combined with wildly inventive, propulsive plots, these archetypes can endlessly captivate, despite a surface familiarity from book to book.

Anyone who doubts the potency of this mix needs only to consult Powers's latest offering, *Expiration Date* (Tor Books, hardcover, $23.95, 381 pages), to be persuaded of Powers's dazzling story-telling gifts.

Set in 1992 Los Angeles, *Expiration Date* is—most simply put—a ghost story. Yet it stands to the average ghost story as the famously eccentric Winchester mansion stands to a tumbledown shack.

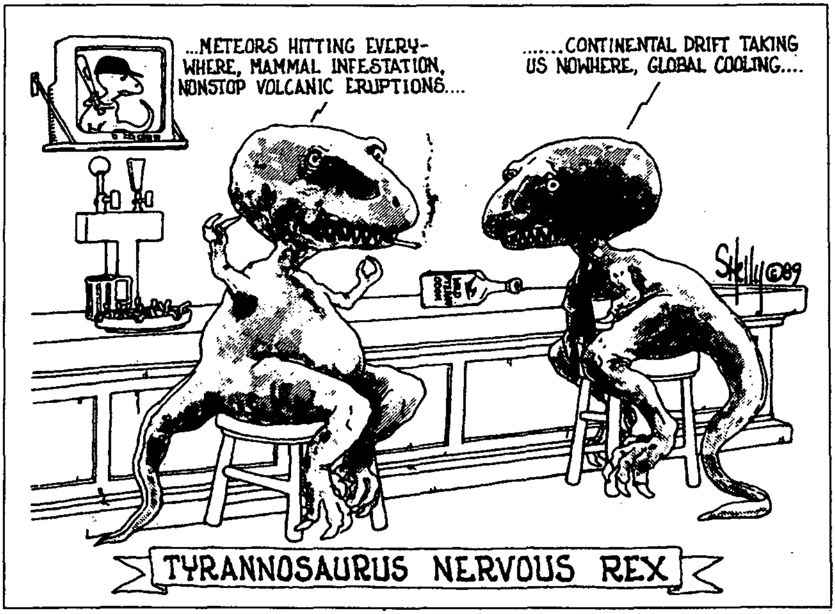
In Powers's LA, ghosts are a hard reality to many cognoscenti. (This Pynchonesque division of society into knowing and unknowing factions is typical of all of Powers's work.) Many streetpeople turn out to be really ghosts in trashy shells; ghost traps for the recently disembodied are placed in potent loci; and an underground industry flourishes, in which bottled ghosts—"smoke"—are sold as an inhalant drug. Into this stable economy, an ectoplasmic monkey wrench is suddenly thrown: the ghost of master mage Thomas Alva Edison is released from long captivity, setting off mental alarms among the spirit-hunting community and motivating a deadly competition among the human and not-so-human ghost chasers.

Into this scenario, Powers injects his usual cast of quirky, yet utterly believable people. Elliptically and separately introduced, some are in flight from the chaos, some are in pursuit of it, but all are inevitably drawn together into the center of the maelstrom. Some will emerge, some will not—but no one will be unchanged.

For the first time in his career, Powers features at the center of his story a juvenile character, the eleven-year-old Koot Hoomie Parganas, son of two New Age dimwits who inadvertently burden their son with carrying Edison's ghost. Powers's depiction of Kootie is unfailingly empathetic, and it's nice to see him stretching a bit. The easy route would have been to make Pete Sullivan—a character so like many another main Powers protagonist—shoulder the whole tale.

What's also pleasant to observe is that darkness in this book is nicely balanced by Powers's trademark wry humor (most evident in the banter between Sullivan and his testy love interest, Angelica Elizalde). In Powers's early books, humor kept an undeniable fatalism in check. By the time of *The Stress of Her Regard* (1989), however, a brooding despair seemed to have gained an exclusive upper hand. In *Last Call* (1992), Powers's most recent book till now, humor pulled itself off the canvas. Here, it raises its bloody gloves in victory over the worst beating evil can unleash.

With *Expiration Date,* Tim Powers delivers a magical realist/screwball-noir masterpiece, a vision of America like something sired by Robert Crumb on Madame Blavatsky. ●


...METEORS HITTING EVERYWHERE, MAMMAL INFESTATION, NONSTOP VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS....
.......CONTINENTAL DRIFT TAKING US NOWHERE, GLOBAL COOLING....
Shelly ©89
TYRANNOSAURUS NERVOUS REX

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

ASIMOV'S/ANALOG combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance ($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020.

ADVENTURE

Visit a strange new world. Experience weightlessness. Breathing medium and apparatus provided. Shuttle leaves twice daily from Zero Duval, Key West, FL. Schedule your adventure with TEAM C. Divers 305-294-5863.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265.

MEMBERSHIPS

WORLD ACUMEN SPACE SOCIETY
W.A.S.S.
Membership Invitation
the BEGINNING *is near*

TM

Write: WASS
PO BOX 42126
PORTLAND, OR 97242-0126

PERSONAL

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance and marriage with Americans! All ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE (Dept. AASF), 20 Albion Street, Broadstairs, Kent, CT10, 1LU, ENGLAND. TEL: 01144-1843-863322 (24 Hours).

HOBBIES AND COLLECTIONS

PLASTIC MODEL KITS

For sale. From and of science fiction, TV, figures, space program, movies, etc. Old and new, hundreds available. FREE catalog. Also buying and trading. John F. Green Inc. 1821 W. Jacaranda Pl., Fullerton, CA 92633. (714) 526-5467 (800) 807-4759/Fax (714) 526-2127.

IN THE FUTURE

your classified/display ad can be placed

HERE

for details—
SF CLASSIFIED
1270 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10020

YOU'LL MAKE MONEY

SAVE MONEY TOO—BY READING and ANSWERING THESE CLASSIFIED ADS

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Note the deadline coming up for the '98 World SF Con. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 1996

16-18—**VikingCon.** For info, write: **Viking Union 202, Box V-1, Bellingham WA 98225.** Or phone: **(360) 738-9898 or 715-7677.** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Bellingham WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the West. Wash. U. campus. Guests will include: Freeman Dyson, Greg Bear.

16-18—**StarQuest. (415) 492-1233 or (209) 584-2577.** San Jose CA. Star Trek meet. 2,000 expected.

16-18—**PrisonerCon.** Portmeirion Resort, Portmeirion UK. Where *The Prisoner* TV show was filmed.

16-18—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** Bayside Expo Center, Boston MA. Commercial media/comics-oriented event.

16-18—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** Novi Center, Novi MI. No guests announced for any of these Creations.

23-25—**BuboniCon. (505) 266-8905.** Howard Johnson East, Albuquerque NM. McKiernan, Vardeman, Garb, Scott.

24-25—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** Convention Center, Valley Forge PA. See above Creation listings for details.

29-Sep. 2—**LACon III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. (508) 283-0802.** Hilton & Marriott, Anaheim CA. WorldCon.

30-Sep. 1—**Armada, 1317 SW 83rd, Oklahoma City OK 73159. (405) 681-5908.** Starfleet (Star Trek) conference.

30-Sep. 1—**MST3K Con, Box 44235, Eden Prairie MN 55344.** Hilton, Minneapolis MN. By the TV show people.

SEPTEMBER 1996

1—**Dum-Dum, McWhorter, U. of L. Library, Louisville KY 40292.** Los Angeles CA. E. R. Burroughs fans' banquet.

6-8—**CopperCon, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. (602) 973-2054.** Sunspire Resort, Scottsdale AZ. L. McM. Bujold.

6-8—**TachyCon, Box 3382, Winter Park FL 32790. (407) 628-1454.** Orlando FL. Low-key relaxacon. 750 expected.

7-8—**IreCon, 11 Town Ct., Shannon Town, Co. Clare, Ireland. (61) 47281.** Port Centre, Letterkenny. Star Trek.

7-8—**VulKon, 12237 SW 50th, Cooper City FL 33330. (305) 434-6060.** World Congress Center, Atlanta GA.

7-8—**VulKon, address and phone above.** Hilton, St. Petersburg FL. These are commercial Star Trek events.

13-15—**Kaleidoscope, 346 Izaak Walton Rd., Lynchburg VA 24572. (804) 528-1266.** Holiday Inn Select. C. Golden.

13-15—**MosCon, Box 9622, Moscow ID 83843. (509) 334-4434.** University Inn Best Western. David Weber. SF art.

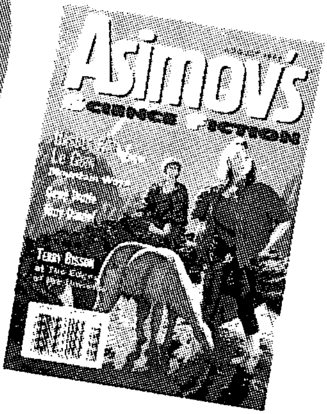
AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**Lone Star Con, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. (512) 435-7446.** San Antonio TX. Budrys. WorldCon.

AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucConeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. (410) 563-2737.** Baltimore MD. Cherryh. $98 to 9/30/96.

CONNECT WITH A WHOLE NEW WORLD



ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
magazine consistently features the finest material from the most respected authors in the science fiction field.

SHARE THE THOUGHTS AND SPECULATIONS OF GREGORY BENFORD, ROBERT SILVERBERG, AND CONNIE WILLIS TO NAME A FEW. YOU'LL BE ENLIGHTENED AND ENTERTAINED BY NEW AND DIFFERENT POSSIBILITIES FOR OUR WORLD AND WORLDS AS YET UNEXPECTED.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

For only $49.97, receive 2 years (24 issues) or send $27.97 for 1 year (12 issues).

To order by charge card, call TOLL FREE

1-800-333-4108

MAIL TO

ASIMOV'S · P.O. Box 5130
Harlan, IA 51593

Outside U.S.A.: Add $5 per year for shipping & handling. (U.S. funds only, payable with order.) Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. We publish a double issue in October/November, which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

HA661

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Fifteen years of microelectronic research makes conventional antennas a thing of the past!

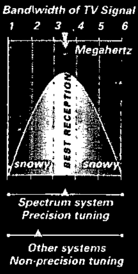
This little box uses your home's electrical wiring to give non-subscribers, cable subscribers and satellite users better TV reception on your local broadcast networks!

by David Evans

SIGNAL SEARCH
FINE TUNER
SPECTRUM

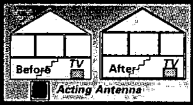
Technology corner

1. Why don't conventional antennas work as well as the Spectrum?



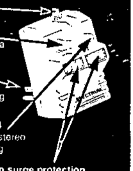
- When TV signals are tuned at the TV channel's center frequency, optimum tuning has been achieved.
- Other antennas can't offer center frequency tuning like the Spectrum Antenna can. They only offer such tuning up to the edge of the center frequency. As a result your TV picture remains snowy.

2. How does Spectrum use a home's electrical wiring as an antenna?



Believe it or not, the Spectrum Antenna simply "activates" the giant antenna that already exists in your home. Essentially, it uses all of the wiring throughout your home's walls and ceilings to make an antenna as large as your house for unbelievably clear reception of local broadcasting.

3. Spectrum antenna features



Parallel 75 ohm resistance
For minimum loss of signal

Signal search control
For selecting multiple antenna configurations

Polarized three-prong plug for grounding
For optimum signal grounding to eliminate noise and static

Resonant fine tuner control
For dialing in crisp, clear TV/stereo reception, eliminates ghosting

Dual AC outlets with built-in surge protection
For plugging in additional TV/stereo equipment guarding against damage and electrical surges

Until recently, the only convenient way to guarantee great TV reception was to have cable installed or place an antenna on top of your TV. But who wants to pay a monthly cable fee just to get clear reception, or have rabbit-ear antennas that just don't work on all stations? Some people just aren't interested in subscribing to cable. Or they may live in an area where they can't get cable and TV-top antennas aren't powerful enough. And what about those people who have cable or satellite systems but still can't get certain local stations in clearly?

Now, thanks to fifteen years of microelectronics research, a new device has been developed that is so advanced, it actually makes conventional antennas a thing of the past. It's called the Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner.

Advanced technology. Just imagine watching TV and seeing a picture so clear that you'd almost swear you were there live. Just plug the Spectrum Antenna into a standard AC outlet and plug your TV into the Spectrum. You can remove the unsightly clutter of traditional TV-top devices gathering more dust than television signals. Get ready for great reception. Your TV will suddenly display a sharp, focused picture thanks to its advanced design "Signal Search" and "Fine Tuner" controls.

Who can use Spectrum?

- ***Cable users-You have cable but you can't get certain local stations in clearly.***
- ***Non-cable users-You don't have cable and want the stations to come in more clearly***
- ***Satellite users-You have a digital satellite system but can't get local stations in clearly***

Uses your home's electrical wiring. The Spectrum Antenna is a highly sophisticated electronic device that connects into a standard wall outlet. The outlet interfaces the Spectrum Antenna with the huge antenna that is your home wiring network. It takes the electrical wiring in your house or apartment and turns it into a multi-tunable, giant TV reception station which will improve your TV's overall tuning capability. The results are incredible. Just think how much power runs through your home's AC wiring system—all that power will be used to receive your local broadcasting signals.

How it works. Broadcast TV signals are sent out from the local broadcast station (ABC, CBS, NBC, etc.). They interface with your home's AC power line system, a huge aerial antenna network of wiring as large as your home itself. When the Spectrum Antenna interfaces with the AC line, the signal is sent to its signal processing circuit. It then processes and separates the signal into 12 of the best antenna configurations. These specially processed signals route themselves into 12 separate circuits. The Spectrum Antenna includes a 12-position rotary tapping switch, the "Signal Switch" control, which gathers twelve of the best antenna configurations.

The "Signal Search" offers varying antenna configurations for the user to select from the best signals of all those being sent. The signal then passes through the Spectrum Antenna's special "Fine Tuner" circuit for producing crisp, clear reception.

Risk-free offer. The Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner comes with our exclusive 90-day risk-free home trial and a 90-day manufacturer's warranty. Try it, and if you're not satisfied, return it for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

Limited time offer! We realize that most people have more than one TV in their home. We are offering a special discount on additional Spectrum Antennas so you get great reception on all your TVs!

Spectrum Antenna	$39 $4 S&H
Additional antennas just	***$34 S&H free***

Please mention promotional code 1492-AS-1550

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours day

800-992-2966

comtrad industries
2820 Waterford Lake
Drive, Suite 102
Midlothian, VA 23113